



CHERRY TREE PERCH

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by

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CHAPTER ONE

SEEN FROM THE PERCH

It was the end of April, and the day before the beginning of a new term. Winter had been long and grey and cold, but now, after a dismal Easter holiday, the sun was out and the sky clear blue.

Annis had arrived at the doctor's house at lunch-time, and had hardly been allowed to finish her meal before Kitty came galloping up the garden path. She slowed up before she reached the porch, gave her heavy dark forelock a scrape through with her fingers, which she seemed to imagine made it tidier, and walked in.

Her momentary decorum vanished as soon as she realised that only Susan and Annis were in the room. She sprang upon Susan with her usual hug, quite undeterred by the natural grimness of Susan's countenance, and chuckled at Annis's silent fielding of the mustard-pot as it tottered on the table's edge.

Susan, who had begun to clear away, pushed her down on the wide window-seat. "No, you needn't help, either of you. Off you go outside and get your chattering done. It's quite certain, since you haven't met for a month, that no one will be able to hear herself think till you're over the first few hours."

Kitty met Annis's eye and grinned, but did not uncurl herself.

"I've been praying and praying that the cold

weather would last till you came!" she announced.

"Good gracious, why? It's a good thing Hugh doesn't hear your prayers, I should think! And it's been perfectly horrible at home!"

"It has here too. But"—Kitty's tone was smugly triumphant—"it's kept the cherry blossom back. I was simply longing for you to see it at its best. And now you will."

Susan, packing things on to a tray, remarked, "It's worth seeing. Are you coming back here to tea, or staying at the farm?"

"Staying, please," Kitty said. "And will you come along too?"

"Thank you, yes. Then I can bring Annis safely back through the bullocks in the field."

"Bring *me* safely home! I don't mind bullocks! Why, I've driven them down the lane a hundred times! Often all by myself!" Annis spluttered with indignation.

"You minded them this time last year," Susan teased her. "Thought the animals were wild beasts who were only waiting to toss you or butt you. And that we were all savages who might burst into song or battle at any minute."

Kitty looked up with interest. "Did you? You never told me! Did you, really?"

Annis said nothing until Susan had taken away the tray and come back empty-handed. Then she ran at her, suddenly, with her head down, and plumped her into a chair and sat on her.

"Yes," she said; "and I still do! You, not the animals; I've learnt better about them, poor things. But the worst of you is, that you've made me into a savage too, and I think it's the proper thing to

make battles—like this!” She tickled Susan till Susan began to yell. “See?”

Susan, flapping with her hands, gasped, “Pax! Pax! You were looking so solemn I simply had to pull your leg! But you know, we all think you settled down most marvellously, wild beasts and savages and all, considering you’d never been in the real country in your life before.”

Appeased, Annis slid to the floor and sat cross-legged.

“I was a bit afraid of the wild beasts,” she owned. “Till I saw Kitty say gobble gobble to a turkey, and young Philip stamp his foot at a cow, and they both ran away. And as for you and everybody—well, you like to pretend you’re savages, but you’re quite kind and well-mannered underneath.”

“The meeting,” Kitty remarked deeply, “concluded with apologies and compliments all round. After which it broke up. *Are you coming with me to see the cherry blossom?*”

As they left the pleasant, square house behind, Annis was pondering on the change in her outlook, not only to the farm beasts but to everything, since she had first come to the Farm School a year ago.

Susan had been then the doctor’s grown-up daughter, who ran the house and did the dispensing and looked after food and clothes and fingernails, as grown-ups always did; who was taken for granted as just rather dull but necessary, as grown-ups always were. Now she was a friend who could tease and be teased, and told most things and asked about everything, and moreover an excellent hockey and tennis player, and a splendid musician as well. Kitty had been a moody, shy, if attractive little creature,

who might go up in smoke at the most innocent remark. Now she was the most satisfactory companion one could want, the greatest fun to play with, the most trusty ally, the most generous rival. The Farm School had been a horrible unknown, foreign to everything Annis had approved of. Now she belonged to it, loved it, entered into every phase of its varied life. Then, her one idea had been that she might escape going there; now, she wished she might stay there all her life.

Kitty stopped at a gap in the hedge which bordered the lane. "You can look down on it from here," she said, and balanced on the gate.

Annis joined her, and saw below, where she was used to green tree-tops, a softly-moving sea of blossom.

"I suppose," she said, "that's what clouds look like when you're flying above them. The sort like snow-mountains, not rain-clouds."

Kitty said, "I don't think even snow could be so lovely. Let's go down into it."

She set off at a trot and they lolloped down the hill together, and presently passed through a tarred gate into the cherry orchard.

"There— isn't it lovely? Better than apple-blossom or the hop-fields or anything?"

Indeed it was more beautiful than anything Annis remembered—except perhaps, she said to herself, the bluebell wood last spring with the sun dappling it through the golden leaves of the young oaks. She stood now and looked her fill at the columns of whitewashed tree-trunks, linked by arches of dark boughs and roofed wonderfully by the bunches of blossom, so close together that only

here and there could the sky, deep blue by contrast, be seen between. The lush green grass underfoot, the faint almond fragrance in the air, completed a memory which, once experienced, would stay in the attics of the mind for ever.

Kitty seemed satisfied by the look on Annis's face. She did not need an answer. She led the way forward, saying over her shoulder, "There's one we can climb."

The tree she stopped at was an old one, sloping slightly backwards from the root, and on its trunk stood out three large knobs, the very things for footholds. Kitty went up them, splayfooted like a frog, and stood in the hollow between the branches at the top.

"There's a good seat here." She pointed to a fork just above her. "And that big horizontal branch isn't bad, with the little one behind to lean against. I'll have that, and you can come to this one."

So Annis followed her up, the blossoms on their long stalks tapping against her face as she thrust between them. She was awkward yet at climbing trees, but she managed to turn herself about and wedge into the fork, which was quite surprisingly comfortable.

Kitty said again, "Isn't it lovely?"

This time Annis did reply. "Rather like being in heaven," she said.

There was indeed a feeling of being above the world. For the orchard was on a slope and the old tree at its highest corner. Below, a bit of the Farm School buildings could be seen, and nearly the whole of the field-path which joined it to the outer world, and a bend of the lane to the village.

Annis said contentedly, "It's a good place!" And Kitty grunted happily, "'M!"

They stayed there, sometimes silent, sometimes talking, as was their habit when they were together. Annis told of her holidays, mostly spent at home in London. Kitty gave details of the farm and of the people they both knew.

"Sheila Matilda's gone to America on a trip. Hugh says she'll end up in Hollywood."

"Riding a property horse!" Annis chuckled. "That'll do her fine!"

"Margaret's got through Cambridge Entrance, but she's got to wait till next year to go up, because they've got such a long waiting list. So she's going to take over some of the dairy part from Hugh. Oh, and we've got a marvellous new cowshed and an electric milker! Father says we must have modern things if we're going to teach modern farming, but he doesn't really like it much. Hugh does, because it's so quick. Only, Mirabel—the new Jersey cow—can't be milked with it because she gives such a lot of milk. She has to be done three times in the day, and sometimes Hugh gets up to do her in the night. He's frightfully proud of her—she's a lovely cow!"

"What are we going to do this term? Farm work, I mean?" Annis asked.

Kitty held a bunch of bloom against her face and sniffed it.

"Fowls, I am. Mother wants me to, because it's not very heavy, and I've got to work for that beastly, beastly music scholarship to the Royal School."

"Then I'll do them too, if I'm allowed to."

"You are allowed to. I asked. It's fun, doing the

same thing, and they're quite useful to know about. I wish they weren't so dull, though—look at those idiots down there." Kitty pointed to three hens which were scratching idly in the cinder-path across the field, and which pounded away, squawking, when footsteps sounded along it. "How they can ever have been wild birds who had to get a living for themselves and escape from wild cats and things, I simply can't imagine!"

"I rather like ducks," Annis said, remembering how they solemnly walked in single file every day to the pond, and back again in the evening, and how they all knew their own houses and would not be diverted into the wrong one, though to the human eye each house looked like every other house and each duck like every other duck. "Kit, who is that going along the path?"

"The doctor's new assistant. Isn't he tall? We like him, rather. He's living in the village, not with you, but he's at the doctor's house a lot."

The young man, bareheaded and loose-limbed, with the look of a townsman, not broad and strong like the country boys, was going in the direction of the doctor's house now. At the stile into the lane he stood aside, as though waiting for someone.

"Now, who's that going to be?" Kitty wondered.

In a second, a girl came into view.

"Huh, it's Margaret. How dull. She's *almost* silly about him. See the way she's looping over the stile, as though she hadn't any bones! He'll help her over, I expect. He's frightfully polite. Little he knows she can jump it without a run if she wants to. There, I said he would. She likes it. I shouldn't, I should think it was an insult to be helped as

though I was too feeble to get over a stile by myself!"

The two stood chatting for a minute. Then the young man himself climbed the stile and Margaret went on towards the farm.

"Hoped he'd turn back and carry her basket for her, I expect," Kitty remarked. "As though he hadn't got something better to do."

For a while there was no sign of life below. Then the hens came back to their scratching, and a group of little pigs ran squeaking across the farmyard. The door at which Margaret had gone in opened again, and Kenneth's nurse came out and then Kenneth, stumbling a little, on his way from the house to the walled garden where he spent most of his days.

"Isn't he getting tall!" Annis said. "Poor Kenneth!"

"Father says he'll have to have someone with him all the time," Kitty commented. "He's getting so independent, and yet you don't know what he's going to do next. But Nanny's so fond of him she'd bite anyone else who tried to butt in, I think."

"Isn't it funny," Annis said, "how happy he always looks. Happier than lots of ordinary well people. I suppose he hasn't any worries, and everyone is fond of him. . . . Look, there's old Peter! He isn't half as fat as he used to be!"

"He's not a bad old chap now," Kitty said almost regretfully. "The boys quite miss having him to rag. There's nothing to rag him about now he's an ordinary size and doesn't stuff sweets all day long. He's been about here most of the holidays, helping Hugh. D'you remember how he used to

vanish the minute anyone mentioned a job of work?"

"No Sheila Matilda to laugh about, and no Peter to rag! It'll be quite dull," Annis said.

"Oh, I expect something exciting'll turn up—it always does," was Kitty's philosophic opinion. "Hallo, who's that in the lane? Look, it's the new doctor again—and Susan."

"Susan said she wasn't going out again till she came over to tea," Annis remarked. "It can't be tea-time yet, can it?"

"Not possibly. The cows haven't come in to be milked. And anyway," Kitty noticed, "they're not going to the farm, they're going to the village. See?"

"Funny of Susan!" Annis commented.

They watched the couple disappear round the bend in the lane. Kitty snapped, "I s'pose Susan can change her mind, same as anyone else, can't she?"

Annis was used to Kitty's fireworks now. Unruffled, she said, "She can, but she generally doesn't." She felt that Kitty did not quite approve of Susan and the young doctor going off to the village together. Perhaps she thought he should have carried Margaret's basket after all.

There was silence and peace for a time. Then Annis, her attention caught by a rustling down below, said, "Goodness, who on earth! Kit, do stop staring at the sky!"

Kitty peered downwards. "Oh—that!"

A woman in bright green cotton, no hat, and with a bush of upstanding grey hair, was lumbering along the path. She lumbered because she was so

hung about with luggage that she could do nothing else. Even so, she could not go on for long, but had to stop from time to time and set down the bulging basket which she had on one arm or the pail packed with fruit and vegetables which shared her other side with half a dozen parcels.

"She'd do better with a wheelbarrow," Kitty said, "wouldn't she? She's taken that little old cottage by the stream, and she's living there all by herself. I've never seen her close to, but Hugh did one day when she came up for some milk. He thinks she's writing a book or something. D'you think we ought to go down and help her?"

Annis did not want to go down. She loved the perch in the tree, and would have liked to stay there all the afternoon. But as the woman moved on, two of her parcels fell to the ground. She picked them up and balanced them precariously on top of a cauliflower, then straightened up again, and did not notice as she did so that again one had rolled off and was left behind on the grass.

That settled it. Kitty shouted, "Oi!" and slid down past Annis, bouncing off the bulges in the tree, leaping between the other trees and over the gate. By the time Annis, always more deliberate, had caught her up, she was on the cinder-path talking to the stranger. Not only talking, but lifting the parcels one by one from the awkward angles they had occupied in the basket and packing them in again expertly.

"That's a bit better. These two simply won't stay in, though. Annis, you'd better take them and I'll carry the pail."

Annis, glancing at the two of them, picked up

the loaded basket, and Kitty seized the pail of garden produce, so that the woman in green was left with only the two small parcels. She looked as though she did not know what to do with so little, but at length smiled, and said, "That's very kind of you. I was getting a bit stiff in the arm."

"You really need a hand-cart, if you're often going to do so much shopping all at once," Kitty remarked, setting off along the path.

The woman said meekly, "It won't happen again. I've only been here a few days, you know, and I was just getting in some stores."

She had a pleasant, cultivated voice, a rosy face which looked as though it were used to fresh air and cold water, strong shoulders, and sturdy legs which ended in flat leather sandals. A queer-looking person, and yet in a way attractive.

"Are you from the farm?" she asked.

Kitty said, "I am. Annis is too, really, only she doesn't live there. We wish she did, only there isn't any room."

The stranger, across Kitty's chatter, caught Annis's eye and smiled.

"I come here in term-time, to school," Annis explained shortly.

The woman said, "Confidence for confidence. My name's Eleanor de Vipon, and I'm living at present in the cottage down there."

"We know the cottage," Kitty volunteered. "What a funny name."

"Huguenot," she explained. "My forebears found England pleasanter than France."

"And you do, too?" Kitty, when she chose, was good at polite conversation.

The woman looked amused. "On the whole, yes. I seldom stay in any place very long. Here's the cottage. It's not quite tidy yet, but come in if you like——"

She pushed the heavy door open, and the girls followed her into a little dark room. The cottage was old, its walls of stone eighteen inches thick, the windows therefore small and deep-set, like loopholes in a castle. There was little furniture to cover the brick floor—a rug which had been beautiful, threadbare now; a carved oak desk and chair, both thick with dust; a trestle table with a form behind it; a small wicker chair with a bright cushion—the only concession to comfort.

Kitty peered here and there, bright-eyed. Annis, behind her, involuntarily shuddered. For the sake of saying something, she asked, "Where do I put these?"

Miss de Vipon dived through a doorway. "Here, please. Just dump them. I'll put them away sometime——"

But even just dumping was not so easy. Every space in the tiny kitchen was packed—the floor, the table, the board over the copper, the sink. Even the enormous mangle which filled one corner had roughly-washed garments dangling all over it, and a basket hooked on its handle.

Annis manœuvred her own basket under the sink; then jumped, because the one on the mangle began to sway and emit a series of squeaks. Kitty, hearing them, looked in from the other room, and their new acquaintance shoved her way across the crowded floor and took the basket down.

"It's a young blackbird," she explained. "He

must have fallen out of the nest before he could fly. My dog found him, and I brought him in. He's getting quite strong——"

She untied a piece of stout string and freed the muslin over the basket, and the girls were confronted by a yellow cavern. Miss de Vipon seized a cup and a spoon, and shovelled some bread and milk into it; there was a gulp, and the cavern closed with a snap, to be replaced by a wide beak above which a pair of round eyes blinked in a tousled head. No sooner had he seen them, than the bird squawked and opened his beak again.

"Raw meat this time," his foster-mother said cheerfully, and gave him a fragment, which he swallowed with obvious enjoyment. "I had some meal-worms, but they're all gone——" He demanded mouthful after mouthful, and at last sank into a contented torpor, a bundle of streaky brown feathers with the great beak like a smile across its face.

The girls were laughing as Miss de Vipon covered the basket again with its muslin and hung it up.

"Wasn't he funny!"

"But I thought," Kitty said, "that injured birds like that always died if you brought them in. We've tried, several times, and they've always been dead by the morning. Of fright, people said."

"Mine don't die, of fright or anything else," the stranger said firmly. "Unless they're too badly hurt to live anyway, of course. I'm always bringing in sick creatures and nursing them back to health."

Annis said politely, "You ought to have been a vet, perhaps. One of the girls at the Farm School is going to be——"

The woman shot a queer look at her. "I've no particular wish to be anything, except myself. But my animals get well——"

She was edging them towards the door now, and they realised it and went that way.

At the porch she stopped them. "It was kind of you to carry my impedimenta. I hope you'll come and see me—and my blackbird—again. It will be several days before I let him fly."

Kitty said, "Rather, we'd like to!" They turned at the gate to wave good-bye. The sun glinted on the green dress and silvery hair of their new acquaintance.

"A queer body," Annis remarked. "Grim and witchy!"

Kitty said, "I liked the bareness of that front room—rather like a monk's cell. And she's got a nice smile, did you notice, when it came, which wasn't often."

"I should think," Annis commented, "a monk would have to keep his cell a bit cleaner than that! I say, it really is tea-time now—and there's Susan, and the doctor with her!"

CHAPTER TWO

THE FARM

It was good to be back at the farm. Most of the Forester family were already at the tea-table when Annis and Kitty came in. Mrs. Forester caught Annis's eye over their heads and gave her the quick, welcoming smile which meant, Annis knew, that she really was most particularly welcome, as one of the family would have been who had been absent for a long time.

Margaret, near the end of the table, was helping the triplets to jam. There was something odd about Margaret.

"Why!" Annis exploded. "You've put your hair up!"

Margaret turned a pink, laughing face to her, and waggled her head this way and that. "D'you like it?"

"It looks topping! If a little unsteady!" Annis told her.

"It's not unsteady at all! It's got about twenty pins in it, anyway!"

Indeed the heavy golden bun at the nape of her neck transformed her from a pigtailed schoolgirl into a quite lovely young woman.

Ruth, who was in Guide uniform, hurrying over tea to get off to a meeting, mumbled, "Much more sensible to have cut it off! How you can bear even two hairpins sticking into your scalp——!"

Margaret only wagged her head more vigorously. "They don't stick in. And it really does stay up like anything, and I don't have to be always getting it cut and set and all the rest of it!"

"And it's far too gorgeous to cut off, anyway!" Annis said decidedly, and everyone laughed, and Margaret got up and curtsied. Ruth, whose hair was straight and mousy, looked a trifle sulky, and then said with virtuous forgiveness, "Well, perhaps it would be a pity. Only so much more convenient. You needn't have it set, after all, and you could cut it yourself——"

"And give the money to the Guides, I suppose!" Margaret retorted.

"Well, you might do worse with it!" Ruth agreed, and would have enlarged on the subject only that Susan and the young doctor, who had come in behind Annis and Kitty, entered the room and everyone began to push chairs about to make room for them.

Mrs. Forester called, "Come up here, where I can talk to you, instead of being pestered by these everlasting young!"

The chairs were scuffled into new positions. Margaret gave a pat to her hair, in case the demonstrations of its stability had loosened a strand or two, and busied herself again with the triplets. More gently than usual, surely, Annis thought to herself, for she was often snappy with their antics. They certainly made a pleasant picture, the tall girl good-temperedly spreading jam, the three small bobbing fair heads, all intent on getting enough and proving their independence by seizing knife or spoon if either was lost sight of for an instant. The

doctor, as was usual with new visitors to the farm, could not take his eyes off them.

Kitty, at Annis's elbow, gave a naughty subterranean chuckle.

Philip, across the table, remarked shrilly, "We've got a steam yacht! Foot and a half long and goes like anything!" He looked expectantly at the young man, who obediently murmured that he would like to see it.

Mr. Forester seemed to have finished tea. They often wondered where his energy came from, for he ate less than any member of his big family. He sat back now and polished his glasses, and remarked, "The South London Repertory people have agreed to come down and do 'Will Shakespeare' in the barn somewhere about half-term. So we're going to take the Tudors right through the school and read all the Shakespeare we can cram in."

Pat asked doubtfully, "Will that be fun?" And everyone laughed.

"What do you think, Annis?" Mr. Forester inquired.

Annis said gravely, "I should think it might, here. Anywhere else, it would probably be perfectly awful!"

Then Hugh came in, and began almost at once to talk about the new cowshed and the electric milker and the new pedigree cow; and how the best of the milk was being bottled by machinery, without ever being touched by the human hand.

The young doctor was very much interested. When they had all finished the meal, Hugh invited him to come and see the innovations.

"Can I come too?" Annis asked.

"Of course. It's almost a pity you learned to be such a good milker: the electric machine will do you out of your job!"

She said cheerfully, "Doesn't matter! I'll creep in sometimes and do a spot of hand milking so that I shan't forget how."

They were all trailing out, now, to the farmyard. Pat gave a tug to Annis's pigtail, and she tweaked his ear, then inquired, "What on earth are you eating? I thought you'd done with tea!"

Pat flushed. "Humbug. Mike gave them to me."

"Give us one!" Philip piped up.

"They're mine. Mike gave them to me, I tell you! I've only got two left and I want them! Ow!—give them up, you blighter, they're mine!"

Philip tore across the yard, waving the grubby paper bag, Pat after him. There was a scuffle, during which Philip upset Pat on the grass, sat on him, extracted one of the big sweets and put it in his own mouth, then plumped the package into Pat's hot hand and remarked sententiously, "If you don't share, you'll lose the lot. Thank you, kind sir, for your so charming gift!"

Mr. Forester, strolling along, remarked, "A lollipop's a small price to pay for learning that lesson! The sooner it's learnt, the less painful life becomes!"

"The sort of thing you do learn, in a big family, isn't it?" the young doctor commented.

"One of the many. There are lots of advantages—to the family!" Mr. Forester said dryly.

The new cowshed was palatial; of concrete so white that it might have been marble. Each stall was divided from the next by bars of polished steel, each cow attached by a shining steel chain and ring.

Instead of a manger, there was a hay-rack above, from which mouthfuls could be pulled easily, and a steel basin with a button in the middle. When the cow, in search of water, touched the button with her chin, a fountain welled up for her, to sink away and leave the pan clean when she had finished drinking.

"Lot of work polishing? Not a bit!" Hugh declared. "It's all chromium plated, only needs a rub over. The old wooden partitions had to be creosoted, and even then they weren't clean. No, we can do now with half the men we had before. Not that we want to throw the chaps out of work, but we simply can't get them! Look, here's the milker."

He brought out a contraption of rubber tubes, buckled it on to a cow, and threw a chain across her back to take the weight off it; turned on a switch; a buzzing sound was heard, while the cow stood placidly chewing as though nothing was going on; milk spurted into the gleaming glass container which was slung above the watchers' heads; and in three minutes the cow was milked and the milk had flowed away unseen through silver-lined pipes which pierced the walls and carried it straight to the cooler in the dairy.

"Isn't it quick!" they all exclaimed.

"Quick, and, more important still, perfectly clean." Hugh handed the milker to one of the men. "Come and see the rest of the performance."

In the dairy, some of the milk from the cooler was led into bottles which ran along on a moving shelf to a machine which fitted them deftly with cardboard caps. Some went to the separator to

provide cream, and some into the big churns which would be sealed, dumped on a wooden platform by the roadside and collected by a lorry of the Milk Marketing Board and taken to London.

"So you see," Hugh said to Dr. Davidson, "provided your cows are healthy and your apparatus clean, there's no possibility of germs getting into your milk from start to finish."

"But how many farms," the young doctor inquired, "are run like this? After all, the milk from one bad farm can infect the lot, except that in the bottles. For I know the milk from the churns is mixed at the big depots——"

"That's horribly true," Hugh agreed. "Still, the more clean milk there is, the more the germs are diluted; and there are quite a lot of careful dairy farmers now, and more will come."

Kitty tweaked Annis's elbow. "Come and see Mirabelle. They'll talk about germs now for the next half-hour."

Annis was mildly interested in germs and would have liked to stay, but Kitty was insistent.

"Here she is. Isn't she lovely?" Kitty slipped into a stall at the far end of the building.

"She's marvellously clean." Annis stroked the cow's snowy face, and the cow blew at them delicately.

"Hugh won't let anyone touch her except himself. To milk her, I mean; he wouldn't mind this. She's going to get firsts at all the shows, he says."

They went next to look at the fowls, whose guardians they were to be for the term. Most of them ran loose in the farmyard, with access to a house in which were rows of laying-boxes. Kitty

showed Annis how these worked—how, when a hen went in, a door came down behind her, keeping her there till someone let her out. "They each have a ring on one leg, with a number on it. And when you let one out, you look at her number, and if she's layed an egg you write it down in the book. Then you can tell which hens are good layers and which are not."

"How do they know to go into the boxes to lay?" Annis asked. "Suppose they decided to do it somewhere else?"

"They seem to like them. They always *do* use them, or very nearly always," Kitty said. "When there's a batch of pullets just beginning to lay, we drive them in once or twice with the old ones, and put a china egg in the box to show them what's expected of them—and they oblige!"

"They're not quite as silly as they look, then," Annis laughed.

"I suppose not, if they're capable of learning," Kitty agreed.

There were a few hens in coops in a paddock, with chicks of various ages in the runs outside—from cheeping balls of yellow fluff to anxious, leggy things with sparse, crooked feathers, like schoolgirls who had not learnt how to dress. There were the white ducks who spent their day on the pond. There were a dozen geese who would come from the other side of the biggest field to a whistle, flying low over the grass with long necks outstretched, who would hiss like snakes at people they did not trust, or hold murmured gossip conversations, head first on one side and then on the other, with human friends as with each other.

There was the turkey gobbler, with his purple, angry face and handsome tail and his flock of meek, drab wives. And, indoors, there was the incubator, a mysterious box through the mica windows of which the process of hatching could be actually watched.

"Only you have to be most frightfully careful to keep it at the right temperature," Kitty said. "Once, someone put in fifty eggs and turned the heating too high—and they simply baked and that was that! No chickens at all!"

"There's quite a lot to know!" Annis remarked.

"Not much really. And not very much to do. Let them all in and out at the proper time, and collect eggs and set them, and make mashies for the feeding. Not a quarter as much as for the cows and pigs."

The rest of the party had come straggling along and were lingering near the hen-house. Kenneth, too, with his pleasant, red-faced Nanny, was passing through the yard on the way back from his walk. Annis, who liked the queer boy, stopped to speak to him.

Pat and Philip, who had made things up, were daring each other to feats such as climbing up the woodpile. A leap from the top of it brought Pat opposite the trap-door through which the hens went in and out.

"D'you think," he said largely, to anyone who might be listening, "I could get through that?"

The young doctor, being near at hand, gave the right answer. "Get through it? Goodness, no! I shouldn't think anything could that was bigger than a cat!"

"Well, I can!" Philip informed him. And proceeded to demonstrate. "We all can! If you can get your head through a hole, you can get the rest of you through as well!"

His head, indeed, went easily enough. His shoulders almost stuck, but after some grunting and wriggling followed his head. His tail needed only a twist and a shove from his outstretched toes—and there he was, grinning at them as he strolled out through the open door.

Philip made to follow him, but was grabbed by Hugh. John, the boy triplet, was only just prevented by Margaret. "No, you don't! You're relatively clean! Get you down on your tummy in that dust and you'll need to go to bed at once instead of in half an hour!"

"Pat did it!" John grumbled.

"Pat's got a boiler suit on, and he's a ruffian anyway! When you're as old as he is, we won't stop you!"

"When I'm as old as Pat I'll do what I like and wear a boiler suit and go in the *pond* if I want to!" the small boy mumbled, and turned a wicked grin on his elder brother.

"Is that true, though?" Hugh asked Dr. Davidson. "That where your head will go, your body will follow?"

"True of a child," was the doctor's opinion. "I don't think it can be true of grown-ups!"

They went then to see another addition to the farm, Hugh's carrier pigeons.

"I've got one on the way back from Bordeaux," Hugh told them. "I don't think he can be here

yet, but I'm hoping he'll turn up later in the evening."

The pigeons lived in a tarred shed protected everywhere with wire-netting against marauding cats. They were just going in, when Pat said, "Look, Hugh, isn't that one of them up there?"

A speck in the sky, making swiftly straight for home, caught the attention of everyone. Hugh, shading his eyes, cried out, "Why, yes, it is! Suppose it's that one I told you of! Get away, all of you, in case you put him off landing!"

They scattered, taking cover among some bushes from which they could still see the approaching bird. Sure enough, he alighted on the little platform which stuck out from the shed, balanced there a second, and disappeared inside. The platform swung up behind him, shutting him in. Hugh dived in through the big door, the rest after him.

He was elated. "It is that bird! At least an hour earlier than I thought he could be! Just under fourteen hours, to come all that way! Incredible, isn't it!"

"How would you have known, if he'd come when you weren't there?" Annis asked. "How long he'd taken, I mean?"

"By this—see?" He showed them a clock, which was stopped by the action of the platform swinging to. "That tells me. And of course I make sure there are no other birds out when there's one doing a big journey. No, that's not a record, his time. But it's amazingly good for a young bird. He *will* break a record, later on, I'm sure."

He had the bird on his hand now, a speckled, bright-eyed creature. "He'll sleep, now, till he's

rested. And then he'll feed till his crop's so full he can hardly move. They neither rest nor feed on the way, or so the experts say. I think they must be right—there wouldn't be time. Four hundred and fifty miles, from Bordeaux. It's been done in twelve and a half hours, once. How do they know the way? Goodness knows! Nobody knows! It's his first long flight, and he went out by cross-channel steamer and then train, so there's no question of his having remembered it! Amazing, don't you think?"

On the way back, Annis and Kitty escaped from the group again.

"There's one thing I always notice about this place," Annis said, "when I come back after being away. There are always things to *think* about. *Why* the pigeons come home, *why* cows need salt-lick, *why* it's good to have milk that no one's had a chance to touch. At home, we just see things and do things and that's that. Here, you've only got to mention what you've done or seen for someone to begin wrangling about how or why——"

"I think that's fun!" Kitty was up in a second in defence of her family's ways. "The other must be most frightfully dull!"

"It is, rather." Annis was not going to fight. "But after all, holidays are meant to be lazy in. My brain gets plenty to do in term! You'll wear yours out, if you're not jolly careful!"

CHAPTER THREE

TWO WAYS

If being back at the farm was good, being back at school was even better. The circular laboratory in the oast-house, smelling delightfully chemical, was more fascinating than it had ever been.

Valerie was to begin Biology this term, in preparation for her First Medical. Annis thought she would do it, too, while Valerie was there to work with. She had not made up her mind whether to do Medicine or to be a Vet., but her leaning was definitely towards science. Mathematics she learned because they were necessary, and indeed Mr. Thornburn made them as interesting as they could be. Geography and history she liked to know about because they kept cropping up in conversation, and if you did not recognise them you felt an ignoramus. Literature did not interest her at all so far and she was not made to pursue it. All other studies, in fact, seemed to her of quite secondary importance to science, which taught you definite things which existed and happened and their how and why.

Kitty had no taste for science at all. Facts simply did not touch her imagination, and she did not care the least bit how things worked. Beauty, in Nature, in art, in music, stirred her easily and deeply, and when she could contribute to that beauty, as she could with her violin and piano, she was content. She had been allowed to drop chemistry.

and physics, to her great satisfaction. Botany she still condescended to attend, and she and Annis spent some of their spare time plant-hunting.

"I wish you'd do Zoology too," Annis said to her on one such expedition. "It's much more exciting to learn about plants and animals both together than just plants alone."

Kitty made a face. "Horrible! Cutting up fish and rabbits all raw!"

"It's only earth-worms, so far!" Annis informed her; and ducked, as Kitty, grubbing for a root, found an enormous member of that species and offered it to her balanced over her thumb. "Thank you, we have all we need of those in the lab. What have you got there? Tway-blade?"

Kitty was squatting over a little greenish spike.

"I don't think so. It looks like it—and yet not quite. It's smaller, and it's not growing in the right sort of place. Tway-blade grows in woods, and this is downland . . . and the leaves are different. It's a funny little thing—I've never seen it before."

Annis, whose less trained observation in such country matters would have called the plant Tway-blade at once and left it, said, "Let's take it back and ask Miss Hunt."

Kitty lingered. "It must be fairly rare, or we should have found it before. And if we pick it, there won't be any seeds and it'll be rarer still. Let's mark it somehow and bring her out to see it."

They were building a cairn of flints to show them where to leave the path, when the dogs, Tony and Tim, began to bark and raced away over the brow of the hill.

Kitty paused in her building. "I hope that isn't anyone who'll find that plant and dig it up——"

The dogs reappeared, dancing and yapping round a Scottie, who walked stiffly on tiptoe between them, growling and rolling his eyes.

"That's the new person's dog, isn't it?—Miss de—what's her funny name—de Vipers," Annis said.

Kitty giggled. "De Vipon! You'll be calling her the Serpent soon," she said. "Yes, here she comes after him." She planted another stone. "She'll be all right about the plant. She's civilised in that sort of way, in spite of her funny house."

The Scottie tired suddenly of the other dogs' attentions and ran at Tony, who, being a spaniel, tucked his tail in and bolted. Tim, however, joined battle, whereupon the Scottie rolled over on his back and kicked with all his legs. Annis, knowing Tim's staying power in a fight, walked in and took him by the tail and tucked him, swearing and struggling, under her arm. Miss de Vipon, arriving at the trot, put her dog on the lead.

"He's a perfect idiot," she said. "He'll attack anything, from an Alsatian downwards, and then lie down and wait for me to pull him out. Throw him a stone from your castle, and he'll forget all about it."

"I don't know whether Tim will, though," Annis demurred. However, as the Scottie was free again and Tim had stopped growling, it seemed the most sensible thing to do. She threw two stones in opposite directions and the two dogs bounced off after them. Tim did no more than give his a sniff and leave it for the more exciting investigation of a

rabbit-hole. The Scottie brought his back immediately, and laid it down before her, cocking his head and demanding, in short, sharp barks, that she should go on with the game.

Kitty, in the meantime, was explaining the "castle." Annis heard her say, "Yes, I'll show you." And Miss de Vipon followed her over the crisp turf and bent with her over their find.

Annis went on throwing stones for the little dog.

In a minute, Kitty came bounding to her. "It's a Man Orchis, and it is rare. If we go back to the cottage, she'll show us its picture in a book, to make quite sure."

The dog Mac would not leave Annis alone as they walked back. So she teased him and threw stones for him, her own dogs treating this far too human game with scorn, and Kitty walked with his mistress.

At the cottage, a big illustrated flower book was unearthed with some trouble, and the pictures of the Tway-blade and the Man Orchis compared. There was no doubt that the plant the girls had found was the rare one and not the common plant which sprang up everywhere in the surrounding woods.

"Good! Now we can tick it off in our Botanists' Pocket Book," Kitty said. "We put the date and the place we've found it. Sometimes we forget we've ever seen one before and then we find we have."

Miss de Vipon agreed that Sutton Malherbe, in spite of its name, was a good place for wild flowers, with its woods and meadows and streams and the spur of downland up the hill. Then she said, "I was

planning to put the young blackbird out to-day. Shall we do it now and see what happens?"

"We'd better shut our dogs out," Annis suggested. "They'll kill any small thing that can't get away from them. What about Mac?"

"He won't take any notice. He chased a rabbit the other day, and caught it up at a bit of wire-netting. He was so surprised he simply jumped over it, and the rabbit had time to double and run away. He's not a country dog, and mercifully he hasn't got the idea of killing things, yet."

So, rather doubting, Annis shut her two out and left Mac in the garden, where he went to sleep.

The muslin-covered basket was carried to an old cucumber-frame. It was unused, and had been very weedy, but now it had been cleared and the glass lids pushed back and stood on end behind it.

"I thought this would be safe for him. When he can fly enough to get over the edge, he'll be able to fend for himself. And Mac will keep the cats out out of the garden—they're the one animal he does enjoy chasing." She was uncovering the basket as she spoke, and took the young bird in a hand which, for all its gentleness, he resented with indignant squawks. "There, little man——"

She placed him on the soft earth inside the frame and he fluttered awkwardly into a corner, still squawking.

Instantly, in the tree above, there came a rustling and the "clack—clack—clack" of a blackbird's warning note.

Kitty clutched Annis by the arm. "Look—oh, look! It's the mother bird, even after all this time away! She must have recognised his voice!"

The three withdrew a little. After a minute, the hen blackbird flew down, first to the upturned lid of the frame, then to the side of it, and finally, inside, close to the youngster. In another minute she was out again, and in another, back with a mouthful of food which she thrust into the expectant beak of the prodigal.

"Now isn't that wonderful!" Miss de Vipon murmured. "I must say I didn't expect it, though it was in this corner of the garden that I picked him up! I've had him indoors a week, and she's after him the very first second he's out! Look, here's the father coming as well."

The handsome cock bird, jet black, orange-billed, rocketed down and stuffed his offspring as though he were sure he had taken no food during the whole of his absence.

"Do you think he'll be tame? The young one?" Kitty asked.

"He may. Though he's never shown any pleasure in my company when he was in. I had a young tit once, that I reared in much the same way, and he used to come to the house every day for meals and insisted on perching on my head. Got horribly mixed up with my hair. I always thought he had designs on it for a nest. But he was older when I put him out. I had a big cage for him, and he taught himself to fly in it."

They lingered, looking back at the frame. "D'you think he'll be all right? All alone there all night?" Kitty asked.

"I think he'll be happier there than indoors. I'm going to put some twigs in presently, so that he can pretend he's in a tree."

Kitty was pleased with that; pleased with the whole incident, and talked about it all the way back to the farm. It was evident that Miss de Vipon had captured her imagination from the very first.

"She's a useful person to know, isn't she? Knows all about wild flowers, and can make sick animals well—I like her, don't you?"

Annis was not quite sure. "She's interesting. But I wish she didn't live in such a muck——"

"That's only because she hasn't been here long enough to get tidy. And because she thinks there are lots of things more important than being tidy, too, I expect. I do, as well. . . . She's going to keep a cow, did you hear? She's coming up to ask Hugh's advice about it."

Annis grinned. "I hope she keeps its house a bit tidier than she does her own, or Hugh will have something to say about it."

Kitty danced on ahead to have a last look at the Man Orchis. "It's going to live in the field most of the time," she remarked. "So she won't have to. And have a shed just to sleep in when the nights are cold—or so she says."

Back, presently, at the doctor's house, Annis drew a breath of content at its shining trimness. There was the same feeling here as in the new cowshed—everything clean and tidy, not just for the sake of being clean and tidy, but because any other state would have impeded the work which was going on there.

The atmosphere of Miss de Vipon's cottage disturbed her; it was so uncertain, so haphazard, there seemed to be no purpose behind the life there. At

first sight there was some resemblance between it and the farm, in that the inhabitants of both treated things of the mind as of more importance than things of the body. But there it ended. The farmhouse was not spotless, like the doctor's, but there was a certain routine which was adhered to, which could be depended upon, a certain discipline among its members. At the cottage, one could imagine the queer woman ambling from one job to another, vaguely, leaving one thing unfinished because she happened to think of another, getting nowhere.

She wished Kitty need not be quite so approving of the cottage and its ways.

Perhaps it was reaction against this newly-found disorder which made Annis throw herself so wholeheartedly into her school work. You had to be orderly, in chemistry and physics, or your results came out all wrong. The sciences themselves were orderly, too. If certain things were done, certain other things followed, however much you might hope or even kid yourself into believing that they might not. Nature, too, certainly had her laws. If you planted seeds from a white poppy, you got white poppies; or, if you got pink ones, it was because the white poppy had been pollinated from a red one, and not just by chance. Tway-blade grew in woods and Man Orchis in pastures; fish grew in one way and earthworms in another; and nothing one could do would alter them.

It seemed to Annis that there were laws in life, too. If you did one thing, another thing followed; and life would be pleasanter if you could get the hang of its laws. Mr. Forester had stressed one of

them, perhaps—if you won't share, you'll lose the whole lot. But there were so many, and far less obvious than Nature's laws, and there seemed to be no one to teach them. No one who knew enough of them, perhaps.

It might, too, have been the side of Kitty's nature which made her ignore the cottage's haphazardness and approve of the interest to be found there, which also made her work, this term, show a distinct falling off. She could do well anything in which she took an interest. But her interests were spasmodic and uncertain. Even her music suffered, now. She wriggled out of practising if she could, slurred over difficult passages instead of working at them; till Susan Cousens, who had taught her from early childhood, tore her hair at the collapse of a pupil who had seemed headed for stardom.

Mrs. Forester said, "She's at an awkward age!" And Susan snorted.

"Maybe. But there's something else as well. We said that of her before, when she was so dreamy she couldn't be bothered to do things properly, and then we found out that she was lonely and Annis put it right. But this is far worse. She was careless, then, but now she's definitely naughty. Sometimes I'm sure she plays badly on purpose, and yet I don't see why she should. I can't think of anything I've done which might have upset her. But if she doesn't pull her socks up soon I think you'll have to try her with another teacher—she's too good to waste herself like this."

Mrs. Forester said warmly, "You can't possibly have upset her; she's tremendously fond of you. She seemed so keen to get that scholarship, and now

she shuts up like an oyster if it's mentioned. Such a nuisance, when her future seemed more or less assured. Where is she now?"

"Who?" Annis asked. She had only just come into the room and had not heard the preceding conversation.

"Kitty, of course."

"I think," Annis said regretfully, "she's helping wash the Triplets. She offered to, so that Ruth could get off to Guides a bit earlier." There were heaps of things Kitty might have been doing with her, but for this excess of virtue.

Susan spread out her hands. "That's just the sort of thing she keeps doing—something you can't tick her off for, something that has to be done now or never—yet something, every time, that keeps her out of the music-room."

"She'd promised to help me identify some plants, anyway," Annis put in hurriedly, fearful that Susan would insist on the practising when Kitty came down.

Susan did. "You can get on with that by yourself. Kitty's music matters far more than her ordinary work just now, and if she won't pay attention to it of her own accord she'll have to be made to."

So Annis took her vasculum and her Bentham and Hooker up into the cherry-tree alone. That perch was recognised, now, as hers and Kitty's, and no one invaded it without their invitation. That was the way of things, at the Farm School. It was realised that people needed dens, and ownership of a tree, a haystack, a summer-house, or a glade in the woodland, was respected by everyone once a claim to it had been staked.

She heard, presently, the sound of Kitty's violin; laboriously played, with hesitations and beginnings again, like that of any raw learner. She thought of some of the days last year, when she had lingered on her way home just to hear Kitty playing; when she had seemed to throw her whole soul into her bow and fingers. What was the matter with her? Was she ill, or thinking, always, about something else, or trying for some reason of her own to worry Susan? Knowing Kitty, she favoured the last; but was pulled up from certainty by the thought that Kitty, ever since the beginning of term, had talked of next to nothing but Miss de Vipon, and her head was likely, even now, to be full of that lady rather than of Susan.

"I wish to goodness the Huguenots had never fled to England!" she thought with irritation; then turned her attention to her plants.

She noticed presently that Susan and Mrs. Forester came out of the house and went away together over the fields, and that a little while later Margaret came out too, looking this way and that as though she did not want to be seen, and set off towards the village. It was when they were all well out of sight that she almost dropped her book with surprise, and sat upright, listening.

After an interval of quiet, Kitty was playing again; something she knew, a melody which throbbed with all the old fire and force and made even insensitive Annis want to sing.

Well, she couldn't be ill, anyway, if she could play like that all in a minute. And, Susan having taken herself off, the ugly, childish performance

which had just finished might well have been staged to annoy her.

Then Annis saw Miss de Vipon, strolling with Hugh across the farmyard. Kitty would be able to see her, from the window. Might she not be playing her very best just to show this new friend of hers what she could do?

The new friend had her hands thrust deep into her coat pockets, her hair flying in the wind, her shoulders humped, her stride lengthened to match Hugh's long legs. Annis suddenly disliked the look of her most intensely, though she could not have said why.

"I wish—I wish I could give her a biff that would land her in that manure heap!" she said viciously, drumming with her heels against the cherry-tree's rough bark. "I'm sorry for whatever cow she gets, anyway!"

Then Martin and Arthur came round the corner from the barn, trotting, with a look about them of two dogs on the scent of a rabbit. They said something to Hugh, and he made them stop and be polite to Miss de Vipon, and then shooed them away, and they hurried towards the house and disappeared. In a minute Kitty's music stopped abruptly, and almost at once the boys came out and Kitty with them. Hugh and Miss de Vipon had gone out of sight into a cow-house. The three were carrying tennis rackets, Kitty two of them, and they came racing straight for Annis's tree.

"Is she there? Yes, I can see her! Anniseed, come and play tennis!"

They were shouting all at once, standing round the tree and waving their rackets.

"I've got yours, and your shoes too!" Kitty added.

Annis looked down at them, hesitating. "I'm in the middle of some plants, and I've got some more to do in the lab sometime!"

Martin jumped up and down in exasperation, coming down plump on both feet at once. "Come along, come along! I've never seen anything like girls! Either you don't do a single stroke, like Beryl, who thinks about nothing but clothes and nose powder—or you won't do a thing *except* work—talk about it all the time and look like hags and never take half an hour off!" He gave an imitation of Miss de Vipon's walk which made Annis explode suddenly.

Arthur boomed out, "Read your classics, boys! The middle way that leads to——"

"Destruction!" Kitty squeaked, as Annis, persuaded, landed among them with a leap.

"It doesn't. It leads to sanity and solid wealth. A healthy fat man in a big red house with lots of gardeners and chauffeurs and butlers and things—er—her!" Arthur stuck his fingers into his armholes and strutted. "Wouldn't Uncle Jack have a fit if he knew that was what I was aiming at, instead of scholarships and goodness and hard-working poverty? Temperance in all things! Nothing too much—specially work!"

Kitty landed him one, gently, with the flat of her racket. "Come along and stop talking bosh! I don't mind your aiming at that; you can finance my concerts with your solid wealth, then p'r'aps Father won't hate you. You and Annis can play me and Martin!"

"Sense versus nonsense!"

"Bulk versus beans!"

They were on the tennis court now, spinning a racket.

"Rough—rough it is—we'll have service!"

Annis loved these games. They were very strenuous, and they were taken very seriously, with due regard for style. Not that you could ever pin Kitty down to a stereotyped method; she was here and there all over the back of the court, with Martin's long arm near the net to volley anything which was sent incautiously too near him. But she was good, very good, and most certainly not the least bit ill.

To-day, nonsense and beans won; but only after a long set, and only because Annis was, somehow, a bit more slow and less steady than usual.

"Working too hard, that's what you're doing!" Arthur teased her. "Didn't I say so? Running after the golden opinions of your teachers instead of the real gold of radiant health! A mistake!"

"You seem to have gold on the brain!" Annis retorted. "If I am doing more work, it's only because I'm interested, not because of anybody's opinion! And because fowls don't take so long to feed and all the rest of it as cows do! Or did, till Hugh got that machine. I don't suppose they take you more than five minutes now! I say, Kit, we haven't fed them yet, or collected the eggs either! What about it?"

"Another set! Another set!" the boys clamoured. But this time Annis was firm, and she and Kitty left them to a single.

The fowls did not, indeed, take long. You let out those who were in the laying-boxes, wrote down

their numbers, took away their eggs. Their indignant clucking, as they ran into the yard, brought all the others pelting up to gobble the mash which was thrown to them. The ducks and geese and young ones were soon dealt with, and all that remained was to take the eggs back to the house.

As they passed the orchard gate, Annis looked back at the gnarled old tree she had been sitting in.

"I can't imagine any other school where you'd be allowed to climb trees whenever you liked."

Kitty sniffed. "Allowed to do anything, here, as long as we do it properly. If we tore bits off the trees, or picked the fruit, or fell out and broke our legs, we should pretty soon be stopped. But just climbing a tree can't do anyone any harm. What are you going to do now?"

Annis stood on one leg, wondering. She wanted to go to the lab and take off the crucible which had been heating for hours and ought to be cool by this time, and weigh its contents and see what they looked like. She wanted, too, to go off with Kitty for a walk, or up the cherry-tree for a jabber, and find out, perhaps, the answer to the mystery of Kitty's bad playing. She wouldn't ask—they were stern with themselves about the matter of asking questions, believing that each would tell the other anything she wanted her to know, and condemning "nosiness" in each other's affairs as one of the major sins. But if they got talking, perhaps Kitty would tell her.

The blossom was falling, now, and each lovely petal had a thin brown edge; instead of being caressed by fairy fingers as you went up the tree, you were tapped smartly by little hard green knobs

which would become cherries; but the leaves were pale green and fragrant, and the perch was a better one in a way than last year's haystack, because you could see so much of what went on below. It was a long time, now, since she and Kitty had had a really good jabber. She would suggest the tree.

Kitty said, "I s'pose you've got to go back to your old lab."

"I don't know. I ought to——"

"And I ought to practise again. I can take the eggs in as I go. Don't burn yourself up."

So that was that. Annis turned away towards the wooden staircase which led up to the lab.

The upper floor of what had once been the oast-house, where hops were dried, was now used as a studio. The drying-houses themselves, circular cells with whitewashed walls and ceilings tapering upwards to a point, were converted into laboratories. There were four of them, one at each corner of the larger room, each with a short flight of rickety wooden stairs to the half-doors, divided horizontally in the middle like stable doors, which led into them.

As Annis came into the studio, Valerie popped her head out of the Zoology lab., and waved and went in again. A movement in the studio itself showed the presence of Adrian Evans, a new arrival this term who spent all his spare time modelling. Annis went across to see what he was doing, and Valerie bobbed out again and joined them. He was a queer, quiet boy with fair hair which always stood up in a tuft; unsociable as a rule, but interesting once you started him talking. He was making a

lamb, long-legged, bulgy-jointed, looking back over its shoulder in surprise.

"Nice," Annis said, and Valerie added:

"It makes one thing of spring and tunes on flutes and shepherds dancing."

Adrian looked pleased. "Do you think so? I hope it does. I didn't want it to be—just a lamb!"

"It isn't just a lamb; it's the spirit of spring," Valerie said. "Are you going to colour it? Black legs and snout?"

"No. I'm going to crackle it." Adrian began to talk about the method of baking pottery to cover it with tiny cracks, like some ancient Chinese ware, and Annis asked him questions about the chemicals he put into the glaze. She was all enthusiasm by the time she went back to her own department. Facts, again; how thrilling they could be—learning things, understanding them, digesting them, applying them with a bit of your own thoughts mixed up with them so that no one else could have made of them quite the thing you made—there was nothing more exciting in the world.

Her crucible was cold, as she had hoped it would be. She picked its lid off with tongs and looked at the grey ash inside, like dried-up bread crumbs. Its appearance was dull enough. But the weight of it—if she weighed it ever so accurately—would tell her what was the unknown substance in the mixture of chemicals she had been analysing.

She departed, for a moment, from her intention of being a doctor or a vet., and imagined she was in a laboratory in Scotland Yard, and that the result of her analysis would clear a man of a charge of murder. That would be worth doing. But

suppose it didn't clear him? Suppose it convicted him and he was hanged? That wasn't so good. Perhaps she had better be a doctor after all.

She went to the door for a breath of air. That was the one drawback of the funny little laboratories—they were stuffy. But the studio had windows all along one side, some at least of them always open.

Through one of them she saw a little figure running across the field. Surely she had not been talking so long that Kitty had finished her practising and was out again. No, she had been about ten minutes—just about time to have unloaded the eggs. Perhaps she had left her tennis racket in the fowl-house and come out to fetch it.

But the path she was on did not lead to the farm-yard. It led to the cottage by the stream.

Annis stumped in and began, with the greatest care, to weigh her crucible.

So that was why Kitty had been so anxious for her to go back to the lab.

Well, it was Kitty's own business what she did with her spare time.

She began the calculation of the results of her experiment. They did not make sense at all. There was no known substance with the molecular weight of the substance in the crucible.

That wouldn't do. Annis put Kitty and her doings right out of her head and did her weighing all over again. It came right this time. It wasn't any good letting people and the muddles they made get mixed up with your work.

She tucked that into the back of her mind as another of the laws which had to be learned.

CHAPTER FOUR

A RESCUE

ANNIS and Kitty were riding, Annis on Tiddliwinks, Kitty on fat Merrylegs. They always used the ponies for their rides together, because they were much of a size and therefore good for talking on. But even Annis rode well enough now to be allowed out on Lady Gay at any time if she preferred the mare. Her great ambition was to have a pony of her own—a big pony, so that they could give up the little ones entirely to the small boys and use Lady Gay and the new one.

"Mother says I can have one if Mr. Forester agrees," she was saying as the ponies picked their way through the beechwoods.

"And Father says you could if there were somewhere for it to live," Kitty told her. "Only he seemed a bit doubtful if there *was* anywhere. It'd have to be one of those little rough ones, to live out all the year, he says, and he doesn't think that would be much use to you."

Annis looked blank. Once having got her mother's permission, she had thought there would be no more difficulty. The farm seemed to be made up of such innumerable sheds and outhouses. Yet, when you came to think about it, every one of them seemed to be in use. She said feebly:

"Goodness, surely there must be some corner where he could be?"

Kitty flicked a fly off Merrylegs' neck. "I expect he'll find somewhere if we keep at him. Or, another thing I thought of was this: the carpentry class is going to convert the garage at the cottage into a house for Miss de Vipon's cow. Couldn't they p'r'aps build you a shed for the pony when they've finished it?"

"When they've finished it! But that'll be ages! And then, I should have to join the blinking class if they were going to do something for me, shouldn't I?"

Kitty grinned. "I s'pose you would. It wouldn't hurt you—it's quite fun. You liked making the canoe last year, didn't you?"

"I didn't mind it," Annis said. "But that was different. It was fun keeping it secret more than actually doing it. Let's go and look at it, shall we?"

They took the path to the boat-house, tied their ponies up, and pulled the *Anderida* out. She looked very small, and their own legs very long.

A rustle in the bushes betrayed that someone else was there, and Philip emerged sheepishly. Kitty said sternly, "What are you up to? And where's Pat?"

The small boy looked injured. "I'm not up to anything. Only lookin' about. Pat's writing out lines."

"Lines? Whatever for?" Punishments were so unusual at the farm school that the girls were positively startled.

A smile of reminiscent glee crinkled Philip's face. "He's writing out fifty times, 'Pass-it-on is a baby game.'"

"But why?" Kitty insisted. "And what is 'Pass-it-on,' anyway?"

"It's a game that new boy Richard taught us. The one that used to go to the village school. You do something to someone—pinch them or something—and say 'Pass it on,' and they have to do it to the next person they meet, and if they don't they're a funk. Well, Richard did something to me, and I did it to Pat, and the next person Pat met was Miss Challis and so he had to do it to her, and she didn't like it."

"What was it?" Kitty wanted to know.

Philip grinned a rather shamefaced grin. "Butted her with his head," he confessed, and the girls yelled with laughter. Miss Challis, who taught languages, was a trim, precise, very proper little lady, and the thought of her attacked suddenly by Pat's little bullet head was more than they could bear.

"It did look rather funny," Philip said. "She sat down bang on the floor, nearly on top of Pat, and told him exactly what she thought of him from there. And then she took him off to her class-room, and sat *him* down to write out the lines. So I thought I'd better buzz off in case anyone noticed I'd done it to him first."

"You ought to have told her that yourself. Or anyway, done half Pat's lines for him," Annis remarked.

The small boy sniffed. "I don't see why. *I* could have met Miss Challis directly after Richard did it to me, only I had the sense to dodge her. Wasn't my fault if Pat hadn't . . . Are you going out in the canoe?"

They looked down at her. "I'm afraid," Annis said, "we're getting too big for her. We were thinking of turning her over to you two."

Philip's expression changed from gloom to ecstasy. "Were you *really*? You're not leg-pulling?"

Kitty said, "No. Really. But it's only a lend, not a give, because although we can't *both* get into her now, we might want to go out alone some time. So don't go mucking her up!"

Annis gave the home-made canoe an affectionate shove back into her place. "Apart from that, you can have her when you like."

"We'll take the most terrific care of her!" Philip promised. "I'll just go back now and see if I can tell Pat about it through the window—it'll cheer him up no end!"

He vanished at the run. "She's a bit heavy to paddle, anyway," Kitty commented. "I don't really mind their having her, do you? I want to concentrate on rowing, this year, too." She was peering now along the river bank. "That's Miss de V.'s garage, through the trees," she added. "The people who had the cottage last year built it. Let's go home that way, and I'll show you what we're going to do to it."

We, she said. So she had joined the carpentry class already, without a word to Annis, although they had always, the year before, done everything together that could possibly be arranged. Annis did not want the least bit to see what they were going to do, but she could not think of any reason for not going that way. They had to ride in single file, bending low on the ponies' necks to avoid the trees, so there was no opportunity for discussion.

The door and the lower windows of the cottage were shut, and there was no one about.

"She's out. Never mind," Kitty said, but Annis had the impression that she was disappointed. "There's no harm in looking, is there? See——" She turned the key and pulled the garage door open. "It's quite a decent big place. We're going to put another layer of concrete, sloping to the middle to make a drain, and a window here, and brick up the end where the doors are, and make another door opposite the window."

"Looks more like a job for a building class than a carpentry class, to me!" Annis said sourly, and Kitty shot her a look of surprise but made no comment. Instead, she said, "What I really wanted to look at was this. There's plenty of room for two stalls, if we made a partition across. What about putting your pony here, too? I've never known a cow and a horse to live in the same house, but I don't see why they shouldn't. Don't you think that's a frightfully good idea?"

She stood back, her feet apart, her hands behind her, her big grey eyes shining. "Don't you?"

Annis looked from Kitty to the garage, from the garage to the overgrown garden, with a tin here, the carcass of a worn-out Thermos there, a bone, and bits of paper that the wind had blown; to the crooked curtains and bleary windows of the cottage, and back again to Kitty, standing eagerly waiting. Rage welled up inside her till she felt as though she would burst.

She said, "I think it's a frightful idea! I wouldn't let a pony of mine live here if—if there wasn't

anywhere else for it in the world and I had to shoot it first!"

Kitty's eyes opened wider than ever. "Good gracious, why?"

Annis was so seldom angry that when she was she hardly knew what to do. Tears came into her eyes. She blinked them back and swept an arm round in an awkwardly expressive gesture. "Why? Look at all this!" she spluttered. "Then you'll see!"

Kitty turned her head this way and that. She said reasonably, "I don't see why at all! I'm not asking you to turn him out on the lawn, and I'm sure he wouldn't mind what he looked at through the window! I'm only suggesting that he should sleep in the shed!"

Annis mumbled, "Yes, along with her dirty old cow!" She was rather ashamed of her outburst. But for all that she was obstinately certain that no pony of hers should ever be housed in Miss de Vipon's garage just to make an excuse for Kitty to pay daily visits to that lady's cottage.

Kitty was angry too, now. "You've no business to call it a dirty old cow! She's *frightfully* good with animals! I expect she's saved the lives of *hundreds* when other people have given them up! Look at that blackbird!"

As though in answer the bird, still rather short in the tail and pouty-beaked as young birds are, shot down to the fence beside them and cocked an inquiring head. "He's as well as anything!" Kitty stormed. "And but for her he'd be dead!"

Suddenly Annis could bear the conversation no longer. She wanted the pony so badly, and this plan of Kitty's seemed the only way to get it within

a reasonable time, and it was a plan she couldn't, she wouldn't fall in with. She could not say exactly why, but she could not have an animal of hers in that place.

She made a blind rush for Tiddliwinks; flung herself on the pony's back, and was off along the path before Kitty had time to turn round.

She left the stream and galloped across a field; up the hill, and jumped the little fence there; through a bit of woodland, and out, thankful that she was alone, to the downs. Merrylegs could not jump that little fence, so even if Kitty came after her, she could not come yet, she would have to go round by the lane. She kicked the pony into a last canter on the springy turf, and pulled up in the shelter of a clump of beech-trees, jumped off, and stood panting.

The air in the grove was cool, in contrast to the golden heat outside. The straight, slim trunks of the trees were dappled with sunlight, which twinkled through the gently-moving leaves. Tiddliwinks gave a great snort of content into the brown drifts below, and Annis, her rage evaporating suddenly, echoed it in a sigh.

Kitty did come after her. She came through the gate from the pasture, and cantered easily across the grass.

"What on earth made you go off like that?" she called. "You might have lamed him, or winded him, or anything!"

Annis looked up at her, scowling on her pony. "But I didn't do any of those things!" she said cheerfully. She was not going to be treated as an ignorant town cousin any more. "I was perfectly

careful, and I know how to look after a pony as well as you do!"

Kitty ceased to scowl before this show of firmness. She said injuredly, "But you never *do* things-like that as a rule! I couldn't think what had happened to you!"

Annis chuckled. "A dose of your own medicine! It's just the sort of thing *you* do, anyway! I just couldn't put up with your burble about my pony living in that shed any more, that was all, and if I'd stayed there you'd have gone on and on about it till I knocked your head off!"

Kitty stared, then laughed. It was queer how they were suddenly friends again. "Well, I'll shut up about the shed, if you feel like that. I do think it was a good idea, though."

Annis raised a warning hand, and Kitty exploded: "All right, all right! Why do you hate Miss de V. so awfully, Annis?"

Annis was startled. "I don't think I hate her. I hate the way she lives. I wouldn't trust her with an animal—or a person who couldn't stand up for himself—but I quite like her really."

Kitty said, "You can't like a person you don't trust—can you?"

They were lying on their tummies now, on the smooth, sunlit grass outside the trees.

Annis wrinkled her brows. "You can like bits of them, I think. I like Miss de V. to look at—she's vivid, somehow—and I like hearing her talk; she's got a funny way of saying things. But I wouldn't tell her anything that mattered—and if she tries to be friendly, I sort of sheer off."

"But why? Why shouldn't you trust her? She

must be good with animals, if she's looked after all those sick ones that she says she has——"

"Sick ones are different." Annis was certain of that. "They're so dependent on you, you'd *have* to be decent to them if they were in your power at all. I think she likes things to be in her power. But if they resisted her at all—as a well animal might—I think she'd hit out at them. I don't know why I think so, I just do. Why do you like her so much, anyway?"

Kitty sat up, her arms round her knees. "I don't know, really. She fascinates me, somehow. I *do* like her, most terrifically. I make all sorts of silly excuses to go to the cottage. I like her more than anyone I've ever met—except you, of course!"

They stared at each other solemnly, Kitty's chin on her knees, Annis's on her cupped hands as she lay. To differ so sharply about a person was something that mattered between them. They had differed about things before, often, all sorts of things, and enjoyed their arguments about them. But this was something which would affect their actual doings. Kitty would find excuses for going to the cottage, Annis would look for reasons to stay away. Kitty would want to tell her new friend all sorts of things, Annis would hate her to know them. Kitty would want to talk of her all day long, Annis would feel like snapping at the first mention of her name.

Looking at Kitty's bright eyes, cager, with a hint of tenderness in them which had not been there a year ago, Annis understood that to try to shake her in one of these queer allegiances of hers was a hopeless task. If she once became attached

to a person, that person had no faults. She buried the knowledge and refused to look at it, but not before she had blurted out, "Oh, Kit—I wish it could have been someone we both liked!"

Kitty shook back her dark forelock and laughed. "You'll like her too, if you see more of her! I've seen her more than you have—she's been up to the farm about the cow, and I've walked home with her—and I've been down there when you've been working—I'm sure you'll like her, if you give yourself a chance! Do try! Please try!"

Annis could never resist Kitty in that mood. She said soberly, "All right. I'll try."

They mounted their ponies again soon after that, and cantered along the top of the rounded ridge, the wind stinging their cheeks.

At the edge of a downward slope, Kitty reined in suddenly. "What's the matter with that lamb? D'you see—lying down, with its mother beside it?"

Annis followed the pointing hand. "Isn't it just asleep?"

"They don't lie on their sides like that to sleep. Foals do—you think they're dead, and they get up and run when you get near them. But not lambs. It's ill, or hurt." Kitty was really worried. "I think we ought to go and look."

They went forward, cautiously, so as not to startle the sheep. The ewe stood her ground, stamping her foot at the ponies. Kitty rolled off and threw Annis her rein.

"Hold them, d'you mind? She'll take less notice of me alone."

She approached the couple slowly, holding a hand out, and saying, "Come along, come along!" in a

soothing, musical voice. She was almost up to them before the lamb took fright and scrambled with difficulty to its feet. The ewe stood with head lowered, so that Annis nearly called out to warn Kitty not to get butted.

Kitty dodged behind the ewe and made a grab at the lamb before it could get away, seizing it round its middle, so that it sat awkwardly with its back to her, like a dog begging. One of its front legs hung loosely from the shoulder. The ewe, realising that it was not going to be chased, backed away.

Kitty took hold of the leg gently and looked at it. "It's broken!" she called. "I wonder what we'd better do?"

Annis came slowly nearer with the ponies. "Can I fetch someone?"

"Shepherd can't be far away. His hut's down there in the hollow. He'll know the best thing for it."

So Kitty was left, one arm through Merrylegs' bridle, the other occupied with the lamb, scratching its woolly head as it lay again on its side. The mother stood patiently by, making no sound.

Annis took Tiddliwinks carefully down the hill, slithering on the stones. She had not to go very far, for the old, bearded man who looked after the Foresters' sheep came trudging up towards her with a sack across his shoulders.

She called out, "Shepherd! There's a lamb up there with a broken leg!"

The old man halted and passed a hand over his hot brow. "Oop there, missie? Can ye show me? Oi've bin lookin' for 'e."

"We saw him from the top," Annis told him. "Kitty's up there, keeping him still."

The shepherd put a hand on Tiddliwinks' saddle and walked beside them, letting the pony help to pull him up the hill.

"Oi saw 'ee hobblin', two—three days ago," he said. "An' then Oi lost 'e. They do go off by theirseln when they be ill, missie, an' sometoimes they do hoide so well we never find 'en. Aye, there they be."

Kitty called approvingly, "That was good and quick! What can we do, Shepherd?"

Shepherd ran a hand over the lamb and stood looking down at them. He said gloomily, "'E won't be no good, missie. 'E be festered, see 'ow swelled it be. 'Ave to shoot 'im, that's all we can do."

Kitty's fingers tightened in the lamb's curly wool. "Shoot him? Now? You haven't got a gun!"

"There's a gun in the 'ut, missie. Oi'll put lamb in this sack an' carry 'un down."

He advanced towards them, but Kitty did not move.

"It would hurt him," she said, "being shoved into that old sack!"

Shepherd smiled, showing jagged yellow teeth. "They doan' feel pain much, dumb things doan'. An' anyway, it wouldn' be for long."

Still Kitty did not move. She said, "I wish you'd fetch the gun up here, so that he didn't have to be carried. We'll wait to make sure he doesn't hobble off, and then gallop away as hard as we can."

Shepherd hesitated, torn perhaps between the wish to please Kitty and the necessity of making a double journey when one would do.

Kitty said, "Please, Shepherd. I'm not going to have him put into that sack."

The old man made up his mind. "Right-o, missie. Oi'll do that."

He was lumbering away when Kitty called after him, "Shepherd, what about the ewe?"

"Aw—'er——" Shepherd scratched his head.

"You can't shoot the lamb right under her nose, can you?"

"That's a fack!" he agreed; and added, showing his concern was more for his own legs than for the ewe's feelings, "'Er'd run a moile! Oi'll take 'er down to the flock."

He produced a length of rope and knotted it round the ewe's neck. She dug her feet in and bucked, but by the application of his stick behind and the rope in front, he got her started down the hill, her deep baas and the lamb's shrill ones echoing into the distance.

Kitty said, "Poor old girl! But it's all for her good, if she did but know it! Annis, get me that loose paling, will you? And hurry, or that old horrible will be back before we're gone!"

Annis had stopped and stared, but before this urgency she moved across and picked up the length of flat wood which had once been part of a fence. "What on earth are you going to do?"

"First Aid, and then take him down to Miss de V. Hold him a minute—I'm afraid he may try to go after his Ma." She was pulling off the girdle of her tunic. "Can I have yours too, please? It won't hurt it."

"Kitty, you can't! What on earth can she do, with a lamb? And what will Mr. Forester say, and Hugh? And Shepherd, when he finds we've gone?"

"I don't care what any of them say!" Kitty spurted.

"Wanting to shoot him just because it'd be a bother to get him better! Annis, don't be a pig; come and help, quick! You *must* help, just to show you don't hate Miss de V.—you did say so, didn't you? And if she gets the lamb better you'll have to trust her, too, won't you? Give me your girdle and hold the ponies. I wish to goodness the little blighters'd stand, but they won't. That's right, I can manage now. You might be shortening Tiddles's stirrups to my length—he'll carry the two of us better than Merrylegs will."

"The two of us?"

"Mc and the lamb! Annis, don't be so *slow*. That old man'll be back on us, and we shan't be able to gallop with the lamb."

Silently Annis dealt with the stirrups.

Kitty was murmuring, "A bandage above the fracture, a bandage below the fracture, and as many more . . . this is the only useful thing I ever learnt when I belonged to the Guides, but I will say it *is* useful now and then."

She was busily winding the girdles round splint and leg, and the lamb lay still, panting. He was bleating no longer, perhaps because he was too frightened. "As many more as are necessary to secure the splint," Kitty said. "I want something to go round his whole chest. Ah, Shepherd's left his horrid old sack. Golly, isn't sacking *tough*!"

"I've got a knife," Annis said, and produced it. They hacked through the edge of the sack, and between them managed to tear a strip off.

"That'll do. Kind friend. There, that won't move, even if we do have to gallop!" Kitty attempted to waggle the splint, which held firm. "Now, if I

get up on Tiddles and hold Merrylegs, do you think you can heave the lamb up in front of me?"

Some anxious moments followed. The lamb was heavy, and could kick with its hind feet. Tiddliwinks objected to having his stomach beaten upon by its little hard hoofs, and lurched forward. Twice Annis had it balanced before her, only to have to drop it because the pony moved and she could not hold the lamb up any longer.

Kitty, aloft, was chattering to herself with rage. She wound the reins round one arm, so as to leave both hands free, got her fingers in the sacking next time Annis heaved, and the lamb was across Tiddliwinks' shoulders, good-shepherd fashion, looking round with absurd astonishment into Kitty's face.

"I hope to goodness it doesn't wriggle," Kitty said with resignation. "I can't possibly hold it if it does. Look, if we get over the side and into the lane, Shepherd won't be able to see us!"

"He won't be able to catch us even if he does," Annis remarked. "So it doesn't really matter, does it?"

"He might try to shoot the lamb from there, in his fury," Kitty said. "And then he'd be sure to get me by mistake. We must hurry—hurry—gr'rup, Tiddles, walk a little faster, please, but don't, for any sake, trot!"

The lamb, miraculously, stayed put, and they gained the gate which led into the lane. Annis, turning to shut it behind them, caught a glimpse of Shepherd, standing on the skyline, his gun beside him, shading his eyes with his hand and peering after them. She scuttled down into the lane with shoulders hunched, expecting to hear the whistle of

shot about her ears, even while telling herself sternly, "You know perfectly well it's only Kitty's nonsense!"

"I expect he's saying, 'O'i'll be danged!'" Kitty giggled when Annis told her "The bloodthirsty old frightful!"

They did not talk much on the way. Annis was occupied in front in picking the smoothest path, and Kitty in forestalling the slightest movement of the lamb in any direction.

When they were nearing the cottage, without having met anyone on the way. Kitty said, "It'll be an awful nuisance if she's still out."

But Miss de Vipon was not out. She had evidently heard the ponies' footsteps, for she was waiting for them at the open door.

"And she looks as though for two pins *she'd* say 'I'll be danged!'" Annis remarked to herself.

Kitty gave her no opportunity to say anything. She sang out, "I say, we've brought you a lamb with a broken leg! Shepherd was going to shoot it, so we stole it and brought it here. D'you think you can mend it?"

Even Annis, prejudiced as she was, could not help admiring the queer woman's strength as she lifted the lamb down and carried him into the garage; her gentleness as she took off the splint and parted the wool to disclose a wound, and cleansed the wound and bandaged it; her efficiency in producing plaster of Paris, making it into slabs, and moulding those slabs to the injured leg in the form of a splint which fitted snugly from the little animal's shoulder right down over his foot.

She stood back and looked at it. "There. He can

walk on that, when it's dry, without taking any weight on his broken leg at all. The only question is, can we stop that sepsis?"

"You mean the wound's poisoned?" Kitty queried. "Can we stop it? Do you think we can?"

Miss de Vipon gave her quick, attractive smile. "We'll have a jolly good try!" she said.

Kitty met the smile with her own, and Annis had a hollow feeling of being left out. She busied herself in carrying away the bowl in which the plaster bandages had soaked.

They arranged a hot-water bottle near the leg to set the plaster more quickly, and chatted while they waited. Presently Miss de Vipon said, "That's hardening quite well. I don't think it'll hurt now, even if he does get up. Come in and have some tea?"

Annis said hurriedly, "No, thank you, Susan's expecting me," and Miss de Vipon shrugged and smiled, and said, "Well, I'm just going to have mine, so good-bye."

They saw her through the window pouring water from the boiling kettle into the teapot.

"You might have stayed!" Kitty grumbled.

Annis said obstinately, "Susan *is* expecting me. I have to tell her if I'm not coming in to a meal. And Miss de V. didn't wash her hands—they're all over plaster and lamb. I couldn't have eaten a thing!"

CHAPTER FIVE

FARM TRAGEDY

ONE day when Annis was just going to settle down to work in the lab, Kitty came rushing up to find her.

"The chickens are beginning to hatch in the big incubator!" she called. "You simply must come and see, whatever you're doing. The poultry people are always let off anything for that!"

So Annis raced down with her, and squatted in front of the incubator's mica window to watch the process which was going on inside. First came the faintest possible tapping, so faint that it was impossible to be quite sure whether it was heard or felt. There was a funny look about the eggshells, too, a brittle, chalky look, which had not been there before.

"The chick starts breathing, or something," Kitty said, "and that softens the shell so that he can break it. I wonder which one will come out first. Oh, look, there's a tiny chip dropped out of that one—and there's another! And look, you can see the end of the chick's beak there, tapping and poking, with a little pink cap over it!"

Sure enough, one egg after another was breaking—a tiny hole at first, then a larger one, and then at last the whole shell burst asunder as a little bird struggled out of each.

Annis exclaimed, "Oh, the poor, bedraggled little things!" And indeed the chicks did look most

forlorn, pink and chilly, with wisps of damp yellow fluff sticking this way and that all over them, their blue-grey eyes blindly blinking, their spindly legs too weak to carry them, their yellow beaks still capped with things like small pink thimbles.

However, they had not long been out before the thimbles seemed to shrivel up and dropped off, and the beaks were opened and shut. The damp wisps dried in the warm air, and the little creatures fluffed themselves up and became quite pretty yellow balls; and even, after a time, rose from their crouching position and took uncertain, staggering steps among the ruins of their shells.

"They'll be pecking, soon," Kitty said. "Isn't it exciting to watch? I've seen it heaps of times, but I never grow tired of it."

"It's so amazing that they can do it themselves," Annis commented. "I always thought the hen did it, from outside, not the chicken from in!"

"And to-morrow, they'll be running round feeding themselves," Kitty went on. "Birds are heaps cleverer than humans, aren't they? When you think how long it takes babies to learn to walk and all that!"

So, what with one thing and another, life at the Farm School was very full. Many of the older pupils were there before breakfast doing jobs which had to be done early, for animals could not wait for their breakfasts until lazy humans had had theirs and smoked a pipe. After breakfast there was class-work—groups of six or so, sitting on the long veranda or out of doors, being chatted with rather than being taught, or so it seemed, by whichever

teacher they were under. They were such likeable, sensible teachers, these highly qualified masters and mistresses whom the Foresters employed. There was nothing in and around their subjects which they did not know or could not find out. They welcomed questions and arguments, though the bumptious pupil was properly quelled by the actual weight of the teacher's knowledge. And, although many of the older boys and girls had to work for exams, they had taken in such a good and interesting groundwork before they reached the exam stage, that the extra work did not seem a mere grind. If you were weak at a subject, the teacher took trouble to find your difficulties and gave you extra coaching or let you drop the subject entirely, according to how bad you were. The only proviso here was that if you dropped one thing you had to take another instead, not just have extra spare time.

Annis's group was much the same as it had been last year—herself and Ruth, who was now more earnest and conscientious than ever; Peter, who was growing so tall that he hardly seemed unduly fat; Arthur, Valerie's younger brother; Joe, who lived in the village; Edith, the niece of the post-mistress, and instead of Beryl, who was now doing almost entirely domestic subjects, there was Adrian, the boy whose aim was to be a sculptor but who had to learn something of ordinary subjects as well.

They were all round about fifteen; all pleasant, free and easy youngsters, except Adrian, who was still very shy. The girls wore gym-dresses, the boys soft shirts and shorts or flannel trousers as they pleased. None wore stockings, though they could do so if they liked. Ruth wore her hair severely

bobbed, Annis kept to her pigtails, Edith had natural, rather unruly curls; Peter's stood up at all angles, Adrian's fell over his nose and had a tuft behind; the other boys had got to the stage of using sticky stuff to keep themselves tidy.

There were no particular enmities in the school, everyone being too busy to bother with them; not many noticeable friendships, though certain crowds or couples would do certain things together as the result of common interests, which varied from time to time. Attachments such as that of Kitty and Annis were rare.

Looking back at its beginnings, Annis wondered how this friendship of theirs had come to be. They had both, at the time, been lonely. Each had been to the other something of a novelty. They had been thrown together in many ways: their farm work, making the canoe, learning to ride, and then by Kitty's accident. Was that all? Annis wondered. Were they really just like these other groups who drifted together and apart according to the things which interested them at the moment? Now that the novelty had worn off, and the loneliness passed, and the difference in their ages and their different trends in school work were pulling them apart, was there really any tie between them other than habit? Did she really like Kitty, with her spitfire tempers, her quaint pretences which she ought to have grown out of but had not; the reticences which nothing but her own will, no pressure from outside, could break down; her infuriating way of quietly going one better in anything you thought yourself specially good at; did she really like Kitty better than anyone else?

Sitting among the green leaves of the cherry tree, so thick now as to hide one effectively from observation from below, Annis thought of Kitty's little straight wiry figure and bright eyes; her honesty, trustworthiness, and quick clear mind; her courage and hardiness, the impish charm she had in spite of all her annoying little bits; and decided that she did.

And what about Kitty? Did Kitty like her as much as she liked Kitty? That was a question to which time—and not much time perhaps—would supply the answer, since it could not be asked outright. Annis squared her shoulders and told herself that it didn't matter anyway. But she knew inside that it mattered a lot.

Queer, anyway, that she should be so fond of Kitty when she had never been specially interested in anyone before. Perhaps being fond of people was part of growing up. Yet there was no one else she really cared two hoots about. Margaret was lovely to look at, Valerie was a nice cheerful stolid old rock, Martin and Miles and Arthur were fun to rag and play games with. But wherever she went in the world there would be other people much like them. Beryl—one hardly noticed whether Beryl was there or not, and the same with Edith. Adrian—yes, she did like Adrian. No one else could model animals as he could, or talk so sensibly about the way to do it; or be so welcoming when one came and watched him. None of the other boys had such blue eyes or such a funny crooked grin. Then there was Susan—yes, Susan was a person who could not be forgotten, a person to be sought out when one wanted advice or cheering up. Kitty, Adrian and Susan, out of the whole school, really mattered to

her. Undoubtedly this interest in other people, as well as in facts, was part of growing up. Interesting, of course; but liable, Annis felt, to hurt if you let it.

She had dawdled at the farm till after tea, and now was going back to the doctor's house to do some homework, and had climbed the tree on the way because she felt like it. Tea had been an extra jolly meal. Hugh had been holding forth about his pigeons, and his cows, but chiefly his pigeons. He had a very high standard, had Hugh. His cows must be the best kept, the cleanest, richest and most prolific milkers in the county; his pigeons must put up a fight for whatever prizes for speed there were to be won.

They had talked about Kitty's lamb, too. Mr. Forester was concerned that it had ever been injured, and spoke of getting a boy to help the shepherd, who was becoming too slow with age to keep an effective eye on all the sheep.

"Chased by some hiker's wretched dog. I expect!" he gave as a reason when somebody asked him. "The ewe jumps a wall to get away, and the lamb tries to follow and falls. We'll get a boy, and another sheepdog, perhaps, and hope they'll manage to keep the flock together. We can't afford to go losing lambs like that, apart from the inhumanity of it."

Kitty said, "You won't lose that one now! We rescued it!"

Hugh snorted. "It'll never be any good, even if it does get better! It never *is* any good, patching up a beast. No good for mutton, because if it hobbles the strong ones'll always get the best grass before it. No good for anything. Waste of time."

"Miss de V. says it may not even limp!" Kitty was up in arms at once.

Hugh was doubtful. "Well, we'll see. In any case, I should think all that plaster of Paris, and all the milk she gives it in the feeding bottle, will come to more than the lamb'll ever be worth in hard cash."

"But that's not the point!" Kitty hurled at him. "The point is that it was *hurt*, and Shepherd just wanted to kill it and Miss de V. could make it better! It's as much right to be alive as you have!"

"It's got to die one day, as I have!" Hugh retorted. "And why put it through a painful, limping, half-starved life first just because you feel sentimental about it?"

Kitty spluttered. "It *isn't* painful and half-starved! You should see it feeding. You can't think except in terms of mutton and pounds!"

Hugh could not resist the last word. "Pounds matter. You've got to make farming pay, same as anything else, and it's no *good* being sentimental."

Mrs. Forester had packed everyone off, then, home or to do jobs, and here was Annis still in the tree meditating. She was always disappointed if she did not see something, or somebody, from the tree, so she stayed a little longer, until she heard footsteps. They were dawdling ones, light ones—Margaret, loitering along, looking about as though she hoped to see someone, carrying a bunch of roses from the garden.

That wasn't exciting. Annis stayed where she was.

More footsteps—brisk ones, purposeful.

"Susan," Annis guessed, and so it was.

Susan disappeared from view.

It was not long before another scrunching came on the cinder-path; a man this time, neither hurrying nor dawdling, but getting over the ground rapidly because of his length of leg—the young doctor.

"I wonder," Annis said to herself, "which of those two he'll catch up first. Margaret was in front, but Susan was going faster."

There was a pause, and then more footsteps—hurried, yet somehow stumbling. Annis could not guess whether they were woman's or man's. She leaned out to see. Why, it was Hugh! Solid, dependable, farmer Hugh, almost running, with something held between his two cupped hands. His face looked funny. He couldn't be crying—not Hugh.

Annis leaned lower and called to him, "Hugh! Hugh! Is anything up?"

Hugh stopped and looked at her, and she saw that he actually was blinking tears from his eyes.

"Some *appalling* blighter's left the door of the pigeon-house open!" His mouth was trembling so that his voice sounded odd. "I heard them fluttering—and there was a *cat*, confound it! And look—my beauty—he'll never fly again!"

Annis was down now, bending over his hands to see the grey bird, its head up, its bright eyes peering out, but, as he showed her, with blood on its feathers and one wing and one leg damaged.

"They're both broken. Of course the cat *would* pitch on the best of the whole batch! Silly of me to have let him get so tame—he's never been frightened."

Annis said, "What are you going to do?"

Hugh laughed shortly. "Knock him on the head."

In spite of herself, Annis protested. "Won't you let Miss de V. try what she can do with him?"

Hugh glared at her. "I won't let her even look at him. She might persuade me, if I did. She might patch him up so that he could waddle round and get fat like a duck. No. That's not what he's built for. He's meant to fly—like a shooting-star—swoop—glide—and be free. If he can't do that, he's better dead. Think how bewildered he'd be, when he saw the others flying and he couldn't. He'll never fly. Birds' bones are brittle; they never heal once they've snapped. . . . If he's got a soul, p'r'aps that'll be able to fly."

Annis's eyes were smarting now. She stroked the little round head with one finger.

"I should think he has," she said. "He must have—lots of spunk—to fly as he did. I don't believe that's all—just wasted because he's dead."

Hugh grunted. "A whole lot of things about him *are* wasted, just because of someone's darned carelessness!" he said. "I'll shoot every cat in the place—and skin everyone who's been anywhere near the pigeon-house this week!"

He was himself again now, and gave Annis a crooked smile. "No, you'd better not come back with me. So long, Aniseed."

He went off, still tenderly nursing his wounded champion.

Annis turned towards the doctor's house. Poor Hugh! Nice Hugh! But which was right? Hugh and the shepherd, who thought that if an animal

was not sound it was better dead? Or the queer woman in the cottage, who would spend infinite time and trouble in patching it up?

Kitty would have declared furiously, of course, in favour of the latter, and Annis felt inclined to do the same. It was horrid, to think of killing an animal. Yet surely, in refusing to kill it when it was hurt, you were sparing your own feelings, not its. That was a sentimental thing to do, Hugh's way was the braver.

"You want," she said to herself, "to know what it's going to be like when it *is* better. And, if that's not good enough, Hugh's way's the best. But if it *is* going to be *really* all right—well, there's no question about it, is there, in spite of all the trouble? But it's sloppy, just to be sentimental about it."

The next day Hugh seemed quite his usual self. The unlucky champion had been duly buried, and Adrian commissioned to make a model of him from a photograph. The two small boys had been convicted of taking a friend to see the pigeons the day before, and although they stoutly protested that they had shut the door and locked it, their guilt was taken as proven, and they were forbidden the pigeon-house for ever.

And Hugh, with the dogged rebound of the true farmer after disaster, discussed with the young doctor which of the remaining birds was to be the champion's successor. The doctor, Annis noticed, was wearing in his buttonhole a slightly faded rosebud of a kind which grew in the garden at the farm.

CHAPTER SIX

NEW FRIENDS FOR OLD

Two or three days later, Kitty and Annis were collecting eggs when a shadow fell across the hen-house door and Hugh's deep voice called:

"Aniseed—could you come a minute? You too, Kit, you're not a bad judge of horseflesh."

"Horseflesh?" they chorused.

"Meatus equinus. *Don't* drop those eggs. Put 'em in the hay; the worst that can happen is that a hen will come and sit on them, and they won't hatch out in half an hour! Stir your stumps—you know how Father hates being kept waiting!"

"Father? Where does he come in?" Kitty seemed still in the dark, but Annis, for once quicker than she, was off like the wind, making for the stableyard.

Mr. Forester was there, and talking to him a strange man in breeches and leggings, holding two ponies; big ponies, a slim dark brown and a stocky roan with close-clipped mane and tail. Annis stood speechless before them, until Kitty, rushing after her, made noise enough to catch Mr. Forester's attention.

"Here you are—that's good! Now you've got to make up your mind which you like best."

"Now? This minute?" Annis's eyes were shining. "But what about its house? Where can it live?"

Hugh, strolling up behind them, said, "That'll be all right. I've cleared a few bales of hay out of a corner of the big stable."

Annis flung herself upon him with an abandon at which she would have shuddered a year before. "Hugh, you darling! Do you really mean it?"

Hugh grunted, "'M! Only you'll have to look after him yourself. I haven't got a man to spare—not often, anyway."

Mr. Forester was leading the ponies into the big field. "Come along, you two! Which of them are you going to try first, Annis?"

Annis flew after him. "I like the look of the brown! Which do you think, Kit?"

Kitty had put on her wise monkey look, which told one nothing. "Wait till we've tried! Can I ride the other one, Father?"

"That's the idea," Mr. Forester said. "Then swop."

They got up, walked, trotted, cantered, turned this way and that.

"May we jump them?" Kitty called.

"Over the log, that's all. It'll give you an idea."

They went over, back, and over again, and pulled up in the middle of the field.

Mr. Forester said, "Well?"

Annis was puzzled. "I'm—not—quite sure. He goes beautifully when he canters, and he's got a lovely soft mouth. But it's frightfully difficult to make him walk—he wants to jig all the time. And did you see how he went sideways at the jumps? He'd never get over a big one like that, would he?"

"Try the other chap," Mr. Forester said, and the girls changed over.

The first thing that struck Annis about the roan was that he was comfortable. Then, that he was

trying to feel, with all his senses, what she wanted him to do. It was as if she was not merely sitting on him, bending his will to hers, making him do things he did not want to, but as if she and the pony were one creature, she the brains and he the sensitive instrument. A lovely feeling. She had only to move a knee or a wrist, and almost before she had done it, while the movement was still in her mind, he would turn on the instant, smoothly, without a jerk. Trotting and cantering were equally pleasant, and he took his jumps cleanly and straight.

"Let's race!" Kitty called, and they cantered together for a minute and then let the ponies out. The brown shot forward, leaving the roan far behind. Annis kicked and encouraged, feeling the pony's muscles stretching beneath her in his effort to catch his rival up. He was doing his best, but faster he could not go. She pulled up at the end of the field, rather crestfallen.

Mr. Forester said, "Never mind. He goes quite well enough. The brown's unusually fast, and you're not buying a racehorse. Canter round again now, both of you."

When they came near him, he bent, and with a swift movement let fly two pieces of white paper across their path. The brown tossed his head and shot to the other side of the field, with Kitty, who had expected something of the sort, laughing as she tried to control him and finally coaxed him back. The roan shook his ears, and rolled his eyes, but continued on his way.

"I think that settles it," Mr. Forester said. "You want something we can trust you out alone with. And you'll find the one you're on much pleasanter."

"You don't think," Annis ventured, "he'll be rather dull?"

The man who had brought the ponies smiled. "You won't find him dull, Missie. He'll keep you in the front batch in any hunt after the first few minutes—he keeps on and on, steady, doesn't race away at the start and tire himself. And he's a beautiful jumper. He'll win prizes for you, if you jump him carefully in his own class."

"Then I'll have him, please," Annis said. "If Kitty thinks so too. Do you, Kit?"

Kitty was beaming. "I thought so as soon as I saw them—and all the more when I'd been on him. He's a tiny bit heavy, but he's marvellously springy—and those thin, lovely-looking ones like the brown do so often throw themselves about or kick or something."

"He'll only kick—your pony—if someone follows him very close behind. Then he *will* kick. Best to tie something on his tail in a real crowd, Missie, just for safety. But it's his only vice."

"I'll do that," Annis promised. "What's his name?"

"Cherry, he's been called. But you can change it if you like."

"I won't. He'd hate to have his name changed! It suits him, too: he's the red sort of colour of cherry-bark. Aren't you—Cherry—Cherry?"

The pony twitched his ears and stretched his neck towards her, nibbling. Hugh slipped two lumps of sugar into her hand, and she offered them, and patted him as he chumped them up.

"Put him in his stall now, and come and see him often so that he gets to know you," Mr. Forester

told her. "And ride him every single day if you can."

Hugh called, "This way, this way," and Annis, leading Cherry, followed.

He had moved one of the farm horses, and put hurdles across the biggest loose-box, making it into two. Tiddliwinks was in the far half, and the new pony was led into the near one and unharnessed. In a few minutes he was contentedly munching hay.

Annis could hardly bear to leave him. "I think he knows he's mine—or at least, that I'm going to look after him, because he'll be as much yours as mine, of course, whenever you want him!" she told Kitty.

"I'll ride him whenever you don't want to," Kitty said gruffly. "You haven't given him a blanket."

They found a little one which would do, and the pony looked round inquiringly as Annis put it on him, and then went back to his hay.

"He is nice, isn't he?" Kitty said. "I never thought old Hugh would bother himself! It generally takes both him and Father months to think out a change like that!"

Annis ran after Hugh to thank him for making the pony possible. "It's most frightfully decent of you—I never thought I should get him so soon!" she babbled.

"I'd heard," he said, "that there had been a spot of bother over a suggestion of Kit's that you should keep him at the cottage. So I thought something had better be done before she wore you down and got her own way."

Annis looked up at his twinkling eyes. "She'd

never have got her own way over that," she stated. "I couldn't—could I? Do you think I could have put him there?"

"I do not," he said decidedly. "Kit just thought it would be somewhere, and didn't look beyond her nose. A horse kept in a dirty place will never thrive."

Annis was relieved. "I'm glad you don't think I was silly," she said, and left him, with a nice warm feeling at his kindness, to look again for Kitty.

She added Hugh, quite decidedly, to the list of people who mattered.

Life at the farm was very busy now, for the soft fruit season had begun. School work was reduced to a minimum, and day after sunny day the girls and boys picked strawberries, a back-breaking job; then raspberries and currants and gooseberries, which were not so uncomfortable, though spiky; packed them for market, listened each day with interest to their prices; or took the best of them to the new canning factory near Maidstone and were allowed to watch how tinned and bottled fruits were produced; or made them into jam, and lived on the remnants, fresh or stewed, for their own meals.

"I love raspberries really," Peter was heard to say one day, "but I'm just beginning to see that it's a good thing they don't last all the year round!"

Then came the cherry-picking, and that was best of all. You slung a basket round you, armed yourself with a long wire hook, and climbed up a tall ladder into leafy thickets where the cherries hung like jewels. And there you stayed, hooking the branches to you one by one till you had stripped them of

their wax-like burden, for half a bushel of cherries took quite a time to pick.

Another joy about fruit-picking was that you were paid for it; not as much as the regular pickers, because you were not allowed to move your own ladders; but so much a bushel, so that the faster you worked the more you earned.

With these activities, and riding and looking after the new pony, Annis's life was very full. Cherry proved, as Kitty often said, a peach of a pony, sweet-tempered and docile, and very skilful. He could jump and dodge and pick his way over rough ground, and find apples and sugar hidden in people's pockets. Yet he had some funny little ways of his own. He hated bicycles. At the approach of one, he would quietly stop and look the other way, as though he could not bear the sight of it; and he would make a wide circle rather than step on a manhole cover or into a puddle in the road. They were all quite harmless habits—just enough to make Annis keep her eyes skinned when she was on him, to ride him instead of simply letting him take her where he would.

The little boys were enormously happy, with the smaller ponies and the home-made canoe. They painted the canoe green and dyed the sail, and paddled earnestly about in search of smugglers and hidden treasure, just as Annis and Kitty had done a year ago. And, which the girls found very useful, they regarded the girls as benefactors and were only too ready to do their odd jobs for them.

One day fruit-picking was held up by torrential rain, so that, after morning school, there was nothing special to do.

Annis found herself at a loose end. Kitty had beaten up the carpentry class to put the last touches to the garage-into-cowshed transformation at the cottage, which had been neglected, like many other things, in favour of the fruit. She wondered whether to join them; but she disliked carpentry, and still did not feel at ease with Miss de Vipon. Kitty chatted with her now as with a lifelong friend, but that only made Annis feel worse. So she wandered to the oast-house, and, as she had expected, found Adrian there engrossed in his model of the unlucky carrier-pigeon. She shed her drenched mackintosh and sou'wester, and went to watch him.

He grinned at her and went on with his work.

"D'you mind my being here?" she asked, and he grunted, "No, if you don't mind my forgetting to answer sometimes!"

She curled up on the bench which ran round the wall and watched the clever fingers patting and pommelling the clay. She had thought the model would be something like a photograph—just the pigeon, standing still. But Adrian had almost put life into it. He had sat for hours by the pigeon-house, observing the pigeons alighting and taking off, and his model was just launching itself into the sky.

He talked spasmodically as he worked.

"I want to make a bronze of it. I've never done one, but it doesn't sound too difficult." And Annis sat enthralled by his account of the process which would be involved. "Old Jackson will help, I think. There's nothing he doesn't know about art."

That was the way at the Farm School. The Art Master didn't just teach you to draw. He could

guide you in everything all round his own subject which you showed signs of wanting to know. There was always someone who could tell you about anything, practically, in the world, and tell you well.

Presently Adrian put the model carefully into the centre of the table and covered it up.

"Can't do any more to-day," he said. "The rain's stopped. Shall we go out?"

They paused at the top of the steps to gasp in sheer surprise at the change in the day. The sun had come out, and all the leaves were glittering with raindrop diamonds. Adrian put out his tongue and caught one, and insisted that it tasted like honey, not like rain, so that Annis had to try one too. The air was rain-washed, very clear, the sky a far-away green shading into gold. A bird in the walnut-tree was singing, his head thrown up, as though if he did not sing he would burst.

Adrian murmured, "'That's the wise thrush, he sings each song twice over!'" And they listened, and so he did.

They scrunched over the glistening gravel of the drive, back to the farmhouse, saying nothing, but breathing deeply, their noses up, because the air smelt so sweet.

At the gate they stopped. Adrian remarked matter-of-factly, "I've got to get my bike." And added, mumbling, "I'm glad you like the pigeon."

He seemed loath to go, and Annis, knowing that feeling about leaving the happy atmosphere of the farm, said, "I wish you came in to tea. It's such fun."

He was doubtful. "There's plenty of time to get

home, really. I don't live miles away, like some of them. And I don't like crowds, really. The Foresters might be different, of course. They are, in most things. But I hated the meals when I went to an ordinary school."

Annis looked at him curiously, imagining him among a crowd of rowdy boys.

"I liked them rather," she said, "when I did. Not as much as this, of course."

"You're nice and normal and steady," he said suddenly. "Not silly and shy like me. But you're—gentle—all the same. Most normal people are so hearty. Laugh in great guffaws and slap your back. That's why I like you, I think, because you don't."

He vanished hurriedly into the bicycle shed, and Annis went indoors, her face flaming with pleasure and surprise.

The carpentry class, such of it as came in to tea, was very pleased with itself. The cowshed was finished, the cow could be bought at any time. Nothing would satisfy Kitty but that Annis should come and see the place.

"What did you do all the afternoon?" she asked. "You might have come and helped."

"Watched Adrian."

"Oh, Adrian! He makes lovely things, of course, but he's so dull!" Kitty dismissed Adrian with a gesture.

Annis was moved to stick up for Adrian. "I don't think he's dull at all. I think he's the most interesting person here."

Kitty glanced up at her. "I never think boys are very interesting. They're so uppish. I say, the

lamb's going to have his plaster off this evening. Now, that's interesting, if you like! Won't it be a thrill, to see him with a nice, straight, healed leg!"

Annis could only agree that it would. And when they arrived at the cottage, Miss de Vipon was hacking off the remaining bits with an enormous pair of scissors.

She hailed the girls with relief. "Do come and hold him! He doesn't like this a bit, and we're both almost exhausted."

Kitty flung herself on the indignant lamb and held him firmly; and in a very few minutes the leg, looking very thin with its squashed wool, was free.

"It's straight!" Kitty said.

"Almost—there's a bit of a bump where the break was, but I don't think it'll matter! Let him go."

The lamb scrambled to his feet. He wobbled a little, for the leg was shorter than the plaster; shorter, a little, than the other leg, so that he went down a bit on that side as he walked. But walk he did, and evidently without pain. Mac came along and sniffed him in a friendly way, and he leapt into the air with just the ridiculous jerky movement of any young lamb who is feeling frisky.

The three spectators of his antics remarked in one breath, "*He's all right!*"

Kitty was looking first at him and then at Miss de Vipon with eyes of wonder. "Isn't it marvellous! And he might have been just mutton! Do you think we could change his name to Byron, because of that engaging limp?"

"Call him, and see if he'll answer to it!"

But the lamb had found some luscious grass, and

did no more than raise his black snout and look at her as he nibbled.

"Silly things, sheep," Miss de Vipon remarked. "I hate their cold amber eyes."

They went to inspect the cowshed, which was very clean with its whitewash, its new concrete, its hay-rack and its trough.

"Hugh says he'll get the cow for you at market to-morrow," Kitty said, "and if you'd like to go too, you may."

Miss de Vipon looked interested. "I should like to. I ought to know the points of a cow, if I'm going to have one. What time, and where?"

Kitty said, "I'm not sure. I'll come down and tell you before breakfast."

Annis felt a twinge, because she and Kitty rode together before breakfast practically every day. Perhaps Kitty sensed her feelings, for she added, "We could come down this way and look in, couldn't we? It doesn't matter which way we go."

The little sitting-room, to which they strolled back, was strewn with papers. Miss de Vipon said, "I'm writing a book. I've been writing it for three years, on and off. Goodness knows if it'll ever get finished."

Annis felt the old distaste creeping over her. It seemed so futile, to begin things and never finish them. She asked politely, "What's it about?"

"The effect of vegetarianism on the human body and mind!"

Kitty said, "Goodness, what a terrific lot of things you know! Are you a vegetarian?"

"Of course, loving animals as I do!" Miss de Vipon replied with dignity.

"And you've just said you hated sheep—or their eyes, anyway!" Annis said all to herself.

Miss de Vipon was still talking. "I don't really know anything about it at all, except my own experience. I'm having to read it all up, that's why it takes so long. But it seemed worth while to get it all together. Yes, I've been a vegetarian for twenty years. Ever since I was able to think for myself."

Annis wondered coldly how old she was.

As the girls went back together across the fields, Kitty said meditatively, "You know, it *is* a bit horrid to eat things that have been alive, enjoying themselves and running about, when you come to think about it! What do *you* think?"

Annis turned on her. "Are you just beginning to imagine *you're* old enough to think for yourself? Because it *isn't* thinking for yourself, to lap up someone else's opinions!"

Kitty said reasonably, "I'm not lapping it up. You've got to *get* your ideas from somewhere, haven't you? Before you can even start thinking about them. Father says we were meant to eat meat, because we've got canine teeth and the proper sort of gastric juice. But I rather think it *is* horrid, all the same. I shall read her book."

"Then you ought to read one on the other side as well!" Annis grumbled.

"All right, I'll do that!" Then, ending the argument as usual by an abrupt change of subject, she asked, "What are you going to do now?"

"I don't know. It's too wet for tennis. Go and talk to Cherry, I think."

Kitty said, "I'll come too."

Annis suddenly, surprisingly, did not want her. She did not want to hear any more about Miss de Vipon, her doings and her views. She said crossly, "You ought to go in and practise!"

Kitty made a face. "You sound like Ruth. I'm sick of practising! I play quite as well as I want to. What's the good of slaving and slaving at the mouldy stuff? I play heaps better than Susan does already. I heard her say so to Mother one day. Still, I won't come with you if you don't want me!"

She turned and skipped back by the way they had come, leaving Annis staring after her.

CHAPTER SEVEN

MYSTERIES

ANNIS felt flat all the evening. She had seen so much of Kitty all the past year that to spend spare time without her seemed peculiar; and to have quarrelled with her and not made it up, horrible.

She went up to bed early, and walked straight over, as she often did, to the window, to see if the one big star, low over the trees in the north-west, was out yet.

The star was there. But there was something the matter with the sky—a haziness which was darker than mist and was rising, not as mist did, from all round the horizon, but from one place. As she looked, there came a red glow—then sparks. Annis turned and shot out to the landing, shouting:

“Susan! Susan! There’s a fire, and I believe it must be at the farm!”

“Fire? What?” Susan was up the stairs in three leaps, peering out.

“It must be at the farm. There’s no other building just there,” she agreed.

“Can we go?” Annis asked, and Susan nodded.

“Put on a coat. I’ll tell Father.”

Young Dr. Davidson had come out of the sitting-room and was waiting in the hall. Dr. Cousens came too, and decided to go round to the farm by road in his car, in case his bag of dressings might be wanted. The other three set out, jog-trotting,

across the fields, the nearer way by far. Annis had to concentrate on keeping up, for Susan played hockey for the South and Dr. Davidson was six feet tall. But she plugged along, although her chest felt like bursting. The Foresters would be all right—there were so many of them to help. But suppose the fire was in the farmyard? What about the stables? What about Cherry?

As they came nearer, Susan panted, "It's the stacks! They're not—very near anything—thank goodness—except the woodpile—that would burn like fury if it got a spark!"

The farmyard was full of flickering light, with the tall points of the oast-house and the low, long stables dark behind it. Little black figures hurried to and fro. Men were shouting, hens were cackling, cocks crowing, thinking the dawn had come. A cow lowed. Horses were stamping their feet.

Annis left the others and loped along a hedge towards the stables. She stumbled over a little pig, who fled squealing; splashed into a puddle and out again, and dived through a drift of smoke which made her splutter.

The stable doors were open, the horses moving uneasily about. A man met her in the passage, and she saw that it was Bullen, the stable lad, looking worried.

"They're not in any danger, miss. But they're stamping about, frightened like they always are if there's smoke about. I shouldn't go too near any of them, if I were you."

"I'll be careful," Annis promised. She slithered along the dark passage and found Cherry's box with Cherry looking out, his ears pricked, blowing softly

through his velvet nostrils. Tiddliwinks, next door, was walking up and down. Annis groped for a bag of sugar on the shelf and gave them each a bit, which Cherry took but Tiddliwinks dropped in his unease. She fondled Cherry's nose and he stayed still, trembling a little, seeming to like her being there.

A drift of smoke came in through the door, and the horses near it began to plunge about. Some of them were tied up, pulling in terror at their ropes. Bullen raced from one to another, calling, "Wo-a, lass! Steady! Steady, mare!" till the smoke cleared and they quieted down again.

"D'you think we ought to get them out?" Annis asked. "It'll take some time—it's no good waiting till the stable's alight!"

Bullen said, "I'll go and see. There's no sense in getting them out just for smoke—where would we put them, anyway? I'll go and look round, miss, if you don't mind being left."

Some more smoke drifted by, and came in on an eddy of wind. Annis ran from one stall to another, but the frightened horses—big Shires, some of them—took less notice of her than of the man they were used to. She was afraid they would get their heads free and bolt, and wondered what on earth she could do then. Suppose the stable did catch before Bullen came back! She groped her way to the door and looked out.

Showers of sparks shot up every few seconds as parts of the burning stacks fell in. But the actual fire was still a good distance away, and did not seem to be coming any nearer. There was a tinny, clanking noise which she could not identify, then

suddenly the sound of a big motor engine, more shouts, and a swish of water. The smoke became denser, and there were fewer sparks and less light. The horses were plunging more frantically than ever.

Annis was hesitating whether to leave them and get help, or to stay and quieten them as best she could, when a figure slipped into the doorway, and Kitty's voice filled her with unexpected relief. It had been eerie there alone, though she had been thinking of the horses, not of herself, and had not realised it till it was over. Kitty was just the right companion. She had a way with animals, even when they were alarmed.

Kitty slipped an arm through hers. "I thought you might be here. Susan said you were somewhere about. There's no danger, really; the fire-engine's come and nothing's caught except the two stacks. I say, the horses don't like it, do they?" She gave a cart-horse a friendly whack on his haunch. "Whoa, you old silly! Nothing's going to hurt you! Steady, now!" She moved from one to another, and they quieted wonderfully at her teasing, calm little voice.

"I suppose they know you're not at all afraid," Annis said. "I was, rather. I didn't know what was happening."

Kitty said, "They always do know. It must have been awfully frightening, to be in here with the whole lot of them and not know whether the place was going to catch fire or not."

"It was, a bit," Annis said. "I hadn't the foggiest idea what to do if it did, except I knew I'd have to get them out somehow."

"It won't, now." Kitty assured her. "The boys had been keeping it under most wonderfully, really, with the little hand-pump we use to spray the fruit-trees with—did you hear it clanking?—and now the big engine's come they say it'll be out in no time."

Very soon the glow outside gave place to moonlight. The smoke had rolled away, the horses were quiet. Kitty said, "Shall we go and look round?"

The stacks, which had been standing up so brave and golden, were reduced to heaps of sodden black ash. The firemen were coiling up their hoses, the farm people were standing about, red eyes in grimy faces. Peter and Martin and the small boys were proudly dragging away the hand-pump which had done such useful work. Hugh, Mr. and Mrs. Forester, Susan and the two doctors, were talking to the Captain of the Fire Brigade.

Kitty wormed herself into the group, pulling Annis after her. "I've got no business out here, really," she whispered. "Margaret and Ruth stayed in with the babies. But I simply had to come."

They were discussing how the fire could possibly have started after the rain.

"A cigarette-end?" someone suggested.

Mr. Forester sighed. "I suppose so. But the men are so used to being careful. We've had no new hands lately—and it's too near the house for tramps. Still, strangers may prowl in, I suppose. It's worrying."

Someone asked, "Is it insured?"

"Oh, yes. Only, the insurance people'll want to know how it happened."

The men continued to talk about insurance.

Mrs. Forester's eye lit on Kitty, and she shook

her fist and pointed to the house. Susan came across to Annis, and the group broke up.

There was cocoa and biscuits in the kitchen at the doctor's house when they got back, and Annis went up to bed with a mind hazily filled with sparks and smoke and the sound of horses' feet, and the queer, comfortable way in which Kitty could quarrel one day and behave as though nothing had happened the next. She must really stop thinking that every one of Kitty's tantrums meant the end of their friendship.

After that it seemed no time at all before Susan was banging on her door and shouting that if she was going to ride as usual she had better tumble up.

They made for the cottage without comment, both remembering Kitty's promise of the day before.

There was no sign of life there, no smoke from the chimneys, no Mac to stretch and wag his tail at them. Kitty threw a handful of little stones at an upper window. There was a burst of hysterical barking, and Miss de Vipon's head was thrust out, her hair on end, her eyes heavy with sleep.

Kitty grinned up at her. "You'll have to get up earlier when you get that cow! Hugh says he'll call for you at half-past one. Are you awake enough to take that in?"

She rubbed her eyes and smiled. "I think so. Half-past one."

"Perhaps you were awake half the night watching the fire," Kitty suggested charitably. "We were, but they packed us off as soon as it was put out. We didn't see you."

Miss de Vipon looked puzzled. "Fire? Was there a fire?"

Kitty threw up her head and laughed. "Was there a fire! Two stacks gone! All we had left till the hay-making. A fire-engine—and goodness knows how many people making a din! Didn't you really hear it? Or see it, or smell it?"

"Not a sound or a blink or a sniff!" Miss de Vipon declared. "I was evidently sleeping the sleep of the just!"

Annis said spitefully to herself, "Yes, with your window shut up tight and your curtains drawn! Stuff!"

"Shall we come in and cook your breakfast?" Kitty was inquiring.

"You will not. You'd find my supper still on the table. Thank you kindly, all the same. I'll get up now."

She drew her head in and the girls turned their ponies away, across the field and up the hill. Looking back from the top of it, they could see the little dog Mac in the garden, ruminatively scratching himself.

Annis felt suddenly sorry for the queer woman living down in the shadows by herself; missing everything exciting in life, surely, as she had missed the fire last night; dabbling in books which would never be finished, in farm and garden jobs which any real country woman would have done ten times better, patching up animals which would never be any good; never doing anything which really mattered. She could not find any single reason for the unbounded admiration which she seemed to inspire in Kitty.

Kitty, with her uncanny insight into Annis's

thoughts, said, "You don't like her any better than you did, do you?"

Annis smiled rather ruefully. "No. Not any better. My hackles go up when I see her, as Tim's do when he sees Mac."

Kitty's eyes took on a dreamy expression. "She's so wise. She doesn't let silly things worry her, like tidiness and proper times for meals, which really don't matter a bit."

Annis flashed, "That's not being wise, it's being lazy and selfish, *I* think! It takes a bit of effort to keep yourself up to time and looking reasonably decent! And she just won't bother to make the effort. And the things she knows, she only knows the tops of. She isn't wise like your father and mother—they know *all* about some things, and aren't a bit ashamed of saying they don't know anything at all about others. All the people who teach at the Farm School are like that. But she's not. She pretends there isn't a thing she doesn't know, and really she only dabbles in the whole lot of them."

Kitty wriggled uneasily, undecided whether to be pleased at the compliment to the school or angry at the slur on her new friend. In the end she said feebly, "I can't help it. I like her. I don't know that I do like people to be as frightfully clever as the farm staff—not ordinary people; teachers have to be, I suppose. She likes me too, I think. She's awfully decent to me."

Annis burst out, "Kit, I wish you'd keep away from her. I don't think she's good for you."

Kitty turned right round in her saddle to stare. "Good for me? What in the world do you mean?"

Annis blundered on. "You're quite different since you've been seeing so much of her. You used to be so clear-sighted, and now you can't see things that are under your nose. Things about her, like her being lazy and half-baked. And your music—you used to work at it—we've always said it's no fun to do a thing at all if you don't do it well—you said that more than I did, even, but I think so too now—and all of a sudden you're quite happy just to be mediocre—Susan's frightfully worried about you—and it's such a shame to waste yourself, just because Miss de V. isn't interested in music and because she's made you think there's something silly about being good at things! And—oh, well, never mind!"

She had been on the point of adding, "And you're always padding off to that cottage, and not caring a hoot whether I want you for anything or not." Only somehow she couldn't.

But Kitty, as usual, read her thoughts. Her eyes glinted, and she dug her heels into Lady Gay. "You're just jealous!" she spurted. "You say I can't see what's under my nose, but it's you who can't see what's inside your own head. You're jealous, and so you want her to be horrid and you just pretend she is. You won't let yourself see her nice bits. And about the music, that simply hasn't anything to do with her at all. As you said, she isn't interested."

Lady Gay had gone off in a canter, and Cherry followed. Annis let him go. She was all in a muddle. She didn't know whether she was jealous or not. She didn't know whether Miss de Vipon was nice or nasty. She didn't know what to do about it anyway.

She caught Kitty up.

"That may be true, some of it," she said. "I may be jealous, a bit. And that may make me blind to her nice bits. But it doesn't make me cross-eyed so that I see what isn't there. And her nasty bits stick out several yards!"

Kitty was breathing hard and angrily. "It's easy enough to see nasty bits in anyone if you're looking for them! Even in you! Don't you see you can't keep me all to yourself for ever, just because I was your friend first? I must make other friends too if I want to, and I do want to!"

Annis nearly said, "All right, that's finished, then," and turned back. But her innate caution made her pause, as usual, before she spoke, and she remembered suddenly a phrase of Miss de Vipon's at their very first meeting. "I never stay anywhere very long." Or friends with anyone very long, she suspected. Then she would go off and Kitty would be left high and dry—and lonely again. So instead, she asked, "What do you want to do? Stop doing things with me?"

Kitty drummed her calves on Lady Gay's sides till she danced. "No, no, *no*! I want to be friends with both of you! Why on earth shouldn't I? I want you and Miss de V. to be friends, too, not behave like a couple of cats when you set eyes on each other, as if for two pins you'd spit and scratch! Don't you remember what Father said that day about the humbugs? If you can't share you'll lose the whole lot? Well, I'm sure that's true of friends as well! I don't go all thundery when you watch Adrian make models or do chemistry with Val, do I?"

"But then," Annis said slowly, "you know perfectly well that I don't care two hoots about Val. You *do* rather snort at Adrian, and try to make me think he's soft. P'r'aps—that's why——"

Their eyes met, unwillingly, a little startled by these revelations. Kitty said, "P'r'aps—it is. *I'm* looking for his nasty bits, you mean. M-maybe." She wriggled, and Lady Gay, in protest, tossed her head.

Kitty began to talk rather fast. "I *do* want to go on being friends with you. I *am* your friend, and you're mine, and nothing can alter it. It's a good, solid, bread-and-butter friendship. I couldn't get on without it. At least, I suppose I could—one can get on without anything—but it would be beastly and I don't want to. But what I was going to say is, I think people want jam as well as bread-and-butter. I do, anyway."

"And you get jam from Miss de V.?" Annis had a quick, incredulous vision of real jam, as she had seen it on the cottage table, sugary, days old, sticking to the sides of the pot.

Kitty said eagerly, "Yes! All the exciting things she talks about! And the way she makes me laugh, and laughs at the things I say! It's such fun! Oh, I wish you liked her too!"

"Only she doesn't happen to bother to sparkle for my benefit!" Annis said soberly.

"You're jolly good bread-and-butter, anyway! And no one can live only on jam!" Kitty conceded.

Annis thought that to her, Kitty had always been bread-and-butter and jam too. That was what she wanted of a person, both steadiness and fun. Well, if she were so dull that Kitty had to look

elsewhere for the fun, that was her own fault and it was no good blaming Kitty.

She looked ahead, between Cherry's pricked ears, to the distance spread out below the downland, misty and beautiful, and said gravely, "All right, I'll go on being bread-and-butter, if that's what you want." And added, all to herself, and then was shocked at her own viciousness, "And I hope the jam won't take too long to make you sick!"

But that was only inside herself, and Kitty was beaming at her. "Then that's all right! Things always do come right if only we can talk about them, instead of bottling them, don't they? Come on, we're going to be late for breakfast!"

Annis felt solemn all day. She had learnt two things about herself—that she could be jealous and that she was rather dull company—and she did not like either of them. And one about Kitty—that, although not exactly fickle, she must dart like a butterfly from one spot of brightness to another, without regard for anybody's feelings. She did not like that much, either. But they would go on being friends all the same, in spite of having uncovered some of each other's nasty bits. Queer, that you could. But it was one of the important things about any friendship which was more than just a mutual admiration society. That, and letting your friend go her own way instead of trying to hold her. Horribly difficult, that, when you were sure the way she was going was not a good one.

CHAPTER EIGHT

AND MORE MYSTERIES

THERE was a solemn atmosphere at the farm, too, the result of last night's fire. On everyone's mind was the bother of having to get more hay at short notice for the animals, which could not go without; of clearing up the mess in the farmyard; and, above all, the puzzle of how the fire could have been caused. So that lessons were gone through seriously, with few of the usual arguments; the animals were fed and tended quickly, with little backchat between the workers; tennis and other games were played earnestly, as though they were not quite proper unless one made a business of them. It was with relief that everyone remembered that the next day the Repertory Players were coming to give their performance of "Will Shakespeare" and that some of the morning would be spent getting the barn ready for them.

The players arrived in two caravans attached to two cars. They lived in these, or partly in them, during their travelling season, going round to villages and little towns which had no theatres of their own. Most of them were young, straight from school of dramatic art, with a sprinkling of old-stagers. They were very friendly, and did not mind the school swarming into their dressing-rooms and probing the mysteries of make-up and scenery. Peter, surprisingly, and Adrian and Kitty, were

particularly thrilled by them. Peter announced again and again that he was going to join them when he was old enough—a good thing, everyone thought, since Peter had so far shown no leaning towards doing anything.

They sat enthralled through the performance. In the first scene they watched the young playwright, Shakespeare, at home in his cottage with the young wife who wanted him all to herself; who could not bear that he should give attention even to his writing instead of all to her; who hated his friends and was rude to them, fearing that they would take him away from her. They saw his struggle with himself, one side of him wanting to stay with her, the other to follow his fortune, to write as his genius urged him, and take his plays to London as his friends advised; saw, presently, the struggle's inevitable end, the young man gone.

Annis, her mind on the scene before her, became aware that Kitty was shooting little glances at her. "You see?" Kitty's eyes were saying. "If you can't share, you lose the whole thing. Anne Hathaway couldn't share."

Annis nodded. In the interval, she said, "P'r'aps he'll go back."

Kitty said tersely, "He won't."

They watched his growing success at Court; agreed in disliking the lady he fell in love with there, though they could not deny her fascination. They liked Kit Marlow, Shakespeare's friend, and were shocked almost to tears by his untimely death in the tavern brawl. "Awful waste!" they said. "All for that horrid girl!" They held their breath at Anne Hathaway's pathetic effort to get her

husband back because their child was ill, and came near to fighting because Annis thought he ought to have gone and Kitty said he couldn't possibly, that that part of his life was over. They laughed, wickedly, at Good Queen Bess in her magnificent garments, with the huge false nose that they had seen put on. But they sat seriously through her sermon to the young dramatist, taking in and quite agreeing with her dictum that the good they could do for their country, she as Queen and he as the finest playwright in the world, must come before their private feelings every time. Kitty frowned a bit and wriggled a bit, and Annis did not know why, but she said nothing.

After it was over, the players were entertained to tea, still in their costumes, so that it was just like having a meal with Good Queen Bess and Shakespeare themselves. They were relieved to find that Marlow, in spite of being dead, had an excellent appetite; and cautiously surprised that Anne Hathaway was not really a nagging little shrew and the fascinating lady really fascinating for all their disapproval. There was a lot of discussion, as usual at farm teas—was Shakespeare really like that, a dreamy, wilful boy who was never really happy in spite of his success? Or Queen Elizabeth, in spite of all her glory?

"Golly, I bet I'd have been happy, if I'd written all those plays and seen them acted!" Peter was sure.

"And I'd have been, if I'd had everyone worshipping me as they did the Queen!" Margaret said.

Kitty said, "You'd both have been all grousy, that your plays weren't acted better or that you

weren't worshipped enough! I say, did Queen Bess really have a nose like that?"

"It was copied from a portrait," its temporary owner alleged. "We always try to be accurate, as far as we can, in historical plays. If the author isn't, we can't help that, but we do try to get the dresses and faces as near as we can."

"She wasn't a beauty, then," one of the small boys remarked solemnly, staring at her prototype, who went off into a most unquently peal of laughter. "I wonder why everyone made such a fuss about her!"

At which Ruth interpolated a lecture to the effect that beauty did not matter at all, only nobility of character, and Philip retorted checkily, "Sez you!"

True to life or no, the play made them think a lot about Queen Elizabeth and Shakespeare, and her doings and his plays were subjects of discussion for many weeks after.

The players were seen off at last, and the rest of the party was still hanging about, loath as usual to leave the farm, when they were startled by a burst of angry squealing.

"What on—who on earth!" Mrs. Forester looked hurriedly round for the younger members of her family, but they were all, even the triplets, in view.

Then Kitty appeared, carefully holding before her in both hands a very small pink pig. His eyes were screwed up tight, as though he dared not look about him, and every few seconds he opened his mouth and emitted an ear-splitting protest, and wriggled with all his might. He was perfectly clean, and smelt of nothing but hay.

Kitty sat down, with the little animal on her lap.

"His mother sat on him," she explained. "He's the runt. The smallest and weakest, and if he's not taken away and hand-fed, he'll just die. Look at the great bruise he's got on his head, poor darling!"

And indeed he had. He opened one eye cautiously. The other was in the bruised part and stayed shut, giving him a ridiculously wicked look.

"I hoped Miss de V. wouldn't have gone," Kitty went on. "But she has, so I'll have to take him down. She won't mind him."

"Animals' Infirmary, Oak Tree Cottage!" one of the small boys intoned. "Let's paint a notice and stick it up!" They were both convulsed with laughter, in which the triplets joined tumbling over one another in amusement, though they did not seem to know quite what they were laughing at. Arthur and Martin exchanged a grin, and Annis wondered what the boys thought of Miss de Vipon.

She asked Arthur, later, when Kitty had gone off with her baby pig.

Arthur wrinkled up his nose. "Well, she's a funny old fish, isn't she?" he replied cautiously; and added in a burst, when he saw Annis was not going to take offence, "We always run if we see her coming—unless she's seen us, of course; we don't want to hurt the old girl's feelings. She doesn't often see us; she always seems to be looking inside herself!"

"Why do you run?" Annis inquired, intrigued.

"Well, she's so terribly *intelligent*, isn't she? Always picking people's brains on this and that—then passes it on as her own, I expect. . Fearfully chatty, and rather condescending. I don't like unattached females; there's something wrong with 'em."

"But——" Annis was rather shocked. "She can't help being unattached, can she?"

Arthur stuck his hands in his pockets. "If she was a nice sort of person, she'd be attached. Family, or job, or something, don't you think? Not just ambling aimlessly round, settling first in one place and then in another. If she can't live comfortably with someone, it's because no one can live comfortably with *her*, you bet!"

"Kit thinks she's marvellous!" Annis grumbled.

Arthur chuckled. "Kit'll grow out of it. She's just something new. Besides, she's very taken with Kit, isn't she, and it's difficult *not* to think a person who makes up to you is rather nice, don't you see? Makes you feel good, to be with them, so you think they're marvellous. Half the time they're not, really, at all, and presently you wake up and wonder what you've been making such a fuss about. Well, I'm talking too much. Coming to play tennis? No?"

"I can't find a fourth. You and Martin had better play a single."

Annis wandered away, meditating on what she found a peculiar state of affairs. Kitty thought Miss de Vipon a wonderful white swan, she herself saw nothing but an ugly black crow, and to the boys she was just a "funny old fish" to be laughed at and avoided. Perhaps the boys' view was the common-sense one.

She thought she would go and see Kenneth in his garden. He, at any rate, would have no feelings about the lady. She turned in through the green gate in the wall.

The half-witted boy, still small and slim for his age, greeted her with his happy, infantile smile. He

liked Annis, perhaps because she was gentle and slow, and she liked him as one might a friendly animal. He was gardening—lumbering about tying up plants, the only thing he showed any intelligence over. It took him about ten minutes to tie a bow, but he never broke the plants while he was doing it, and time was of no matter to him. He led her round, pointing out one flower after another, taking particular pleasure, it seemed, in the brighter colours. Two cats came with them on their walk, having slipped noiselessly in through the trap-door, like the one in the hen-house, which had been specially made for them in the green door because Kenneth liked cats.

He laughed at them, childishly; laughed, too, at the remains of a bonfire which the gardener had made a few days before. Laughing was always his way of showing pleasure.

Annis walked round with him once, then came away. She always found the walled garden soothing; Kenneth was so contented there, so entirely without worries that one could hardly be sorry for him. She locked the green gate on the outside. That was the one rule about going to see Kenneth: if he was in the garden alone the gate must always be locked in case he should get out and be lost.

She met Kitty, full of enthusiasm, coming back from depositing the pig.

"She says it'll have to be fed every hour with brandy and water from a fountain-pen filler. All through the night as well. I'm going to ask Mother if I can sit up with it. And she's got the cows—two, because she couldn't make up her mind which

she liked best so she had them both. She'll be able to sell the milk, too, with more than one, and it can go up to London with ours. One wouldn't have given enough. Will you come and sit up with the pig, too?"

Annis was not sure. She did not think it would be worth the battle she would have with Susan to get permission.

Kitty said, "Come and try! She's indoors, talking to Mother. Then we can do it in relays, and all get some sleep."

However, Mrs. Forester put a firm foot on the whole project. "Idiotic idea! If Miss de V. wants to sit up with a pig I can't stop her, but I won't have you doing so! And if you don't do a bit of practising, young woman, I'm going to dock your supper! No work, no eats! And it's got to be proper practising—I shall be here all the time listening! You're driving Susan completely bats with your rotten performances, and that scholarship exam's looming very near! Off with you!"

Kitty's colour had faded and she looked suddenly near tears. She went off to the music-room on lagging feet, and Margaret, murmuring some excuse, went after her. Ruth, industriously darning by the window, put on such a superior air that Annis wanted to smack her.

Going home, Annis and Susan talked about Kitty.

"D'you think she'll get her schol?" Annis asked.

Susan answered energetically, "Not at the rate she's going now. I don't know what's the matter with her. Can't you find out for us? You bucked her up no end last year just by making friends with her. Can't you do it again?"

But Annis shook her head. "She doesn't pay any attention to me now. Or if she does, we quarrel. The only person who could do anything with her is Miss de V., I think."

Susan shot a glance of surprise. "Nonsense! You're seeing things!" she protested. But Annis, once started, could not stop. She poured out all her feelings—a recital in which Miss de Vipon came out as a kind of witch, who had cast a spell on Kitty and wrecked Kitty's music and their own friendship and kept her pet birds and lambs and piglets as familiars to attract people to her. "But she won't attract me! I hate her!" she finished up. "Kit says I'm jealous, but I'm sure I'm not. I just can't stand her, and I'm sure she'll do Kit some harm."

Susan, instead of laughing, listened. "I don't think she's as bad as all that, and I think you are jealous, a bit," she said. "But if it's due to her that Kit's music has gone bad on us, I must find out about it."

Annis was rather ashamed of her outburst. "If she does get it, what happens next?" she asked.

"She'll go to the Royal School of Music."

"Live there? This very next term?"

"Live in London. She'd have to. She couldn't go to and from here every day."

Annis considered the idea of Kitty living in London, with no country sounds and smells, no animals to look after, no cherry tree to retreat to, no family to squabble with her and comfort her.

"She'll simply loathe it!" she said.

In the middle of the night, or so it seemed, Annis was awoken by the telephone. That was not unusual,

in the doctor's house, and the next thing that usually happened was the sound of the doctor's car being started and driven away. But to-night there was almost at once a general conversation—Susan and Mrs. Cousens and the doctor—more talking on the telephone—young Dr. Davidson arriving. Annis could not refrain from leaning out of the window.

There was that same red glow in the sky, the same acrid, smoky smell; only, this time, not in the direction of the farm.

She called, "Susan! Is it another fire?"

"Yes. Not at the Foresters', at the next farm. Ferguson's. Their stacks, this time."

"Can I come?"

But Susan shook her head. "We're not going. There's nothing we can do—they've got the engine. They sent for Father because someone's badly burned."

CHAPTER NINE

SOME EXPLANATIONS

IN the morning, Kitty was already in the stable when Annis arrived.

"Hear about the fire?" she inquired at once, and seemed quite disappointed when Annis knew even where it had been.

She went on importantly, "I discovered it! You didn't know that, anyway, did you?"

Annis said, "Well, I discovered the other one! As far as our house was concerned, anyway! What did you do, wake up and see it out of the window?"

Kitty was irritated. "No, I *really* discovered it, before anyone else did! And you couldn't possibly see it from any of our windows—they all look the other way."

"Well, how, then?"

Kitty grinned. "I was furious that Mother wouldn't let me sit up with the pig," she said. "So I decided I would jolly well go, after all, and I did. It was easy enough—no one ever shuts doors in our house, and Hugh often gets up in the night to look at some animal or other, so no one bothers if they hear someone about. I just slipped out. About half-past ten, it must have been; I had to wait till everyone had gone to bed. And when I got to the other side of the farmyard—well, I couldn't have missed it if I'd tried!"

"What did you do?" Annis asked. There certainly

was no stopping Kitty once she had set her mind to a thing.

"Had to go back, of course!" Kitty grumbled. "I couldn't let the blinking things burn, could I? And everyone was so excited about it that they forgot to ask me what I was doing dressed at that time of night, and there wasn't any row at all!"

"And did you go to the pig afterwards?" Annis asked.

"How could I, with everyone up? No, I hung about till they'd finished telephoning and everything, and then Mother pushed me back to bed! Awful frost!"

"But a frightfully good thing you were up!" Annis remarked generously.

"M! They got the engine pretty soon, and saved one stack. Father's frightfully worked up about it—can't think how they've been done, and going to post men in all the farms for the next few nights! Are you ready? I want to go and ask after the pig!"

"Miss de V.'ll be snoring!" Annis objected. "It's a shame to wake her."

But they went to see, and she was doing no such thing. She was up and had superintended the milking and even done some of it herself. Such milk as she had not kept had been put into one of the big churns and trundled to the side of the main road, there to be picked up by the lorry which took milk from the Foresters' and other farms to London. She was very pleased with herself, and evidently saw herself as quite a farmer. The cows had been turned out in the field at the side, the lamb was there too because no one knew quite what to do with it and it ate the flowers if it was allowed in the garden.

And the very small pig was in the kitchen, lolling by the fire in the dog's basket like a little old man. Tim, after exchanging snarls with Mac, walked up on tiptoe and sniffed it suspiciously, and the pig took not the slightest notice.

"I think perhaps he's rather drunk," Miss de Vipon said. "He's had quite a lot of brandy. That would make him drowsy. But he's heaps better."

They stood looking down at him, surprisingly pink and clean, with not the slightest smell of pig and really not unlike a new baby.

"Did someone say there'd been another fire last night?" Miss de Vipon asked. "I thought I smelt something when I was up feeding this creature, and then I heard two men talking about it in the lane."

Kitty said, "Yes. Isn't it horrid? *Can* fires like that start all on their own, or must it be someone doing it?"

But Miss de Vipon spread out her hands, and confessed, for once, that she knew nothing about the causes of fires in stacks.

At the farm, talk buzzed about the subject.

"Father says it must be in—what's the word—an incendiary. Guy Fawkes. Done a-poppus," Philip informed the crowd.

"But who on earth could have done it? And why?"

"Might be Miss de V.," Arthur said naughtily. "She's the only new person hereabouts, and she is a bit odd!"

"What about Dr. Davidson?" Kitty retorted. "He's new, too!"

Margaret snapped, "Don't be ridiculous!"

"It can't be anyone like that," Ruth remarked, "because all the people round about are our friends, and they wouldn't have fired ours first. Or at all, for that matter!"

Pat said deeply, "That was probably a blind. To put us off. How about that for a clue?"

Martin said very loudly, "Nonsense, nonsense, don't gossip!" And it was seen that Mr. Thorburn and Miss Challis had come into the barn. The crowd split up into its various classes.

Annis was kept busy these days. She looked after Cherry herself—fed him, and kept him and his stable clean; partly because of Hugh's suggestion that she should, and partly because she liked to. She got to know the pony's little ways so well, and was sure he was fond of her.

She had hopes of being allowed to enter him for the gymkhana at the local Agricultural Show, and spent much time with him in the big field, jumping him; making him turn and twist round an obstacle, and stop and stand and start again, and not mind if she bumped some awkward thing like a sack of straw on the saddle as well as herself. Sometimes he would stand still and roll an eye at her, as though to protest that he could not possibly put up with such indignities. But generally he was very obliging, and she enjoyed seeing him trying to understand what she wanted him to do and then cleverly doing it.

In addition to that, there was the fact that she was too young to be doing public examinations, yet was as big and strong as many of the older people. So those who were working for Schols or

Matric turned over some of their jobs to her, and as well as her own duties with the fowls she would milk and hoe and spray fruit-trees, and even help with the pigs. She loved the life, as long as she was allowed to be out of doors, and often said she could not imagine, now, what the people at ordinary schools did with their spare time.

"What *did* we do with it?" she asked Adrian one early morning, when they were parading up and down rows of turnips, spudding little weeds so that, left rootless, the sun should dry them up when it appeared.

"We didn't have much," Adrian said. "We did lots of unnecessary lessons that weren't going to be any use. Lots of silly homework that we forgot the next week. Far too many games. And a lot of just lounging about. Now, for instance, we shouldn't be up. And for an hour and a half at lunch-time we should be mucking around, talking or punching other fellows' heads or something like that. Not allowed to do our own things, and not made to do anything of any use."

"I like what we do here, don't you?" Annis said, and he grunted, "Rather! Like the whole show. And specially the way they do leave us alone to do our own things when the ones we've got to do are finished. I'm going to model the little pigs. I've begun, only they *will* look like film ones. Fat and china. And they're not a bit like that really. I'm going to sit over that one they've got indoors for a bit, presently. The others won't keep still."

Annis's heart gave a jump. Then Miss de V. would get hold of Adrian, too, if he went to the cottage often to model the pig.

"Do you like Miss de V.?" she asked.

Adrian looked vague. "Like her? Not specially. I shall have to be polite to her, if I want to look at her pig. I don't bother much liking people or not liking them, as a rule, unless they're actively horrible and then I keep away from them."

That did not sound too bad. To Adrian the witch was no more than the guardian of a pig. Perhaps she wouldn't get him after all.

Later in the day, Kitty seemed disposed for Annis's company. She led the way to the cherry tree and scrambled up.

"Look here," she said, "we solved that other mystery, that silly little one about Merrylegs and the cart, by just sitting and watching. Why shouldn't we do the same with this?"

Annis had a vision of Arthur's face, tolerantly grinning at Kitty's flights of fancy. She adopted his matter-of-fact tone.

"Because," she said, "this mystery happens after dark, when we're in bed, and even if we weren't we couldn't see beyond the ends of our noses."

"There might," Kitty said, "be a moon."

"Only there isn't. It's in its last quarter, and the evenings are as dark as pitch." Annis could outdo any countryman, now, in matters of sky and weather.

Kitty hunched up her knees, and her eyes took on the distant look of those of a sailor perched in an eagles' nest.

"Well, I'm going to come up here very often," she said, "and I advise you to do the same. You never know when you may pick up a clue. And there's a thing no one seems to have thought of

about those stacks. They were wet. Very wet. They'd have smouldered for quite a time before they began to flame. So they probably weren't set fire to after dark at all, but during the day. What about that?"

However, their look-out yielded them that day nothing of excitement at all. So that presently they left it, and walked home through the farmyard, with the intention of feeding the fowls on their way, before they went indoors. As they passed the woodpile, they noticed a little collection of hay leaning against it; hay which had fallen off a cart, most likely, and been blown by the wind into a sheltered corner.

There was nothing odd about that. One often came upon these wisps. Annis gave it a flip with her foot as she passed. Then she stopped dead, her mind full of Kitty's talk of clues. For one end of it was blackened, and on the ground, hidden until she had disturbed it, was a box of matches.

"It would be simply awful if the woodpile burned," she said slowly. "The stables and the oast-house and all would go, if there was any wind at all. I think this is serious, don't you?"

That it was serious was quite evident when they told their discovery to Mr. Forester. He and Hugh came and looked at it. Hugh rang up the fire-station, and the Captain came along, and they all stood and scratched their heads over it.

"What puzzles me," the fireman said, "is that it's such a very amateurish attempt. The wood's still damp from that rain, and even if it weren't that amount of hay wouldn't ignite these big logs."

"P'r'aps they were interrupted before they had

time to build it up," Hugh said. "Obviously they'd have needed some twigs as well."

"Then why had it been lit?"

They all shrugged and shook their heads. The puzzle was beyond them.

"Nothing more anywhere else?" Mr. Forester asked. It was such a horrid thought that some person unknown was intent on burning down his farm.

"Nothing so far," the fireman said. "I'll just go along while I'm here and have another look at Ferguson's."

Even as he spoke, Annis and Kitty were clutching each other, and pointing. For beyond the farmyard, near the house, a cloud of smoke was billowing to the sky.

The three men took to their heels without a word, the girls racing behind them.

It was past the stables, past the oast-house, past the farm. It was in Kenneth's walled garden. Mr. Forester unlocked the green door and shouldered in, followed by a shout of relieved laughter. "It's a bonfire!"

A pile of garden rubbish was beginning to flame. Before it Kenneth stood raptly gazing. The gardener's fork was stuck in the ground beyond.

Kenneth, startled by the intrusion, retreated to the far side of the fire. Annis went round to reassure him. The fireman, as though by habit, took up the fork and gave the heap a pat. A spurt of sparks flew up, and then a flame, and Kenneth chuckled with pleasure. A second pat covered the opening and the flame was smothered by smoke.

"Well, that's nothing, thank goodness! Quite

gave me the jitters. Doesn't get us any further, though," the fireman said. "I'll get along to Ferguson's."

The men went off. Annis and Kitty stayed a few minutes, with the idea that Kenneth might be frightened. But he took no notice of them; he was interested in nothing but the fire. That was his way—his undeveloped mind could take in only one thing at a time.

They went back to their feeding of the fowls; a dejected collection, scratching and clucking in the yard, evidently convinced that they had been forgotten.

They had just finished when they saw someone coming towards them—a boy who walked uncertainly, peering here and there, as though he might be looking for something but had forgotten what or where.

"Gosh, it's Kenneth! We must have left that door unlocked!"

They went to him, quietly, because he was so easily startled, like one of the farm beasts they were so used to. Luckily he was, as usual, pleased to see them. They let him watch the hens feeding, which seemed to amuse him, then gently piloted him back to his own domain.

Kitty, who had gone on in front, called back over her shoulder, "Annis, this gate *is* locked!" She flung it open and they went in.

"Well, I'm quite sure he didn't come out when we did," Annis said. "And I could almost have been certain we locked it. I suppose we might not have—we were talking. P'r'aps the gardener left it for a second while he trundled a barrow out, didn't notice

Kenneth had gone, and shut it when he came back. That's the only explanation I can think of."

"Well, he's back now, anyway," Kitty said. "I'm glad we saw the chap. I'd hate him to get run over or run in!"

"He's part of the place, somehow, isn't he?" Annis said. And Kitty agreed. "Yes, like some rather precious pet."

They wandered round together after restoring Kenneth; visiting kittens and calves, looking for cherries which had been missed in the picking, wondering if any plums were ripe yet and finding none. It was the sort of amble they had often enjoyed before Miss de Vipon's acquaintance had given Kitty other things to do. Annis, while rejoicing in the return of the old companionship, could not help wondering what had brought it back. Had Kitty and Miss de Vipon quarrelled? She knew she was a pig to hope they had.

Kitty, unasked, supplied the answer when their meanderings had paused in the branches of the cherry tree. "Has Susan told you she's taking me to London to-morrow?"

"No!" Annis was surprised. "Whatever for?"

"To see Dr. Banks. He's the head of the Royal School of Music. Susan knows him. I've got to play to him, and he's going to say whether it's any use going in for that scholarship or not. And if he says it's not, I'm not to do music any more except as a hobby."

Annis said feebly, "What would you do, then? And why isn't Susan sure?"

Kitty grinned. "Susan's all in a muddle about me." She was silent for a minute, then added

explosively, "I'm going to play as badly as I possibly can!"

"Kit! Why on earth? It's awful of you, to let Susan down!"

Kitty's mouth took on a determined line. "I can't help it. Don't you see what'll happen if I do get the beastly thing? That I shall have to leave all this and live in London? Oh, I know *you* do, and you don't mind it, but if I had to live there for a week I should *die*! I nearly did, that time I stayed with you. I shouldn't be able to play a single note, anyway, I'm sure I shouldn't, so it would all be wasted. To *live* there, in a horrible house—without a garden—with people I don't know—and all the noises and the smells——"

Annis said, "People get used to them, you know. Hardly notice them after a bit. And you'd get heaps better music than you can here—concerts and opera, and marvellous people to teach you. And you'd come home for holidays."

Kitty sat hunched, a picture of misery. "I've said all those things to myself. I know I ought to go. I know I might make a great musician if I did go. That's not conceited, it's just true. I've heard great musicians. And if I stay here I shall never be anything much, I suppose. I came round looking at things to-day to persuade myself that they didn't really matter, that I could remember them while I was away and get along without them. But it's no good. I can't go. I simply can't. And if I play vilely to this man, they'll stop trying to make me."

Annis was really shocked. She had been brought up rather stocially, to think that feelings and what you wanted did not matter much. If a thing came

along to be done, you did it, and that was that. Then she remembered what she had felt like before she came to the Farm School.

"I thought coming here would be simply awful, you know," she said, "and it turned out to be lovely."

But Kitty did not react. "You didn't know anything about it," she mumbled; "I do. Enough to be perfectly certain it'd be awful. And I'm not even going to try it—they'd never let me give it up once I got there. And"—she turned on Annis with unbelievable ferocity—"if you tell Susan—or anybody—what I'm doing, I'll never speak to you again except to put curses on you!"

Annis promised solemnly, "I won't do that." After all, it was Kitty's own concern. There was, however, her own half-promise to Susan. "I wish you'd tell Susan yourself, though. Just so that she would understand about it."

"I won't, I won't, I won't!" Kitty shouted. "She'd only say I wasn't old enough to know my own mind. But I am. And now I've soaked myself in all the country things, to-night, I shan't change it to-morrow when I get to that place, either!"

Annis saw them off in the morning, Kitty's face set with determination, Susan puzzled and anxious.

It was queer, spending a whole day without them. Annis fed the fowls by herself, and exercised Cherry. He seemed to know something was unusual, for he was more than generally docile, and nuzzled her with his velvet lips when she led him in and out.

"Fun if we could win something at that show, wouldn't it be, old man?" she said. "And you're so

clever, I really think we might." She put on his blanket and left him to his breakfast.

The morning was not so bad, because Kitty never was in Annis's batch for lessons. At "break" she went with Adrian to look at his models of baby pigs. She loved them, but Adrian, as usual, was dissatisfied. He had not a particle of conceit; he never quite approved of his own work, though much of it was beautiful.

"Do you think you're going to be a great sculptor one day?" Annis asked him, remembering Kitty's opinion of herself the day before.

Adrian grinned. "Goodness knows! Anyway, it doesn't matter. I shall like doing it, whether other people like it or not. Being great simply depends on what they happen to be liking at the moment, that's all."

Funny how neither of them cared, really, whether they were great or not, but only whether they were content. Perhaps that was the way of artists. Annis was rather glad she was not one. Though she did not like Ruth's point of view any better, that you weren't being really good unless you were uncomfortable.

At lunch-time she played tennis, at tea-time helped with the milking. She had intended after that to walk into the village with Margaret, who had said she was going there, but Margaret with determination fended her off, and she could not think why until she saw Dr. Davidson's car go along the lane just after Margaret had started, and heard it stop and at once go on again.

So she took the dogs and went off with them, and after a run in the woods landed up, as usual

when she was alone, in the cherry tree. The dogs had come to know it, and after snuffling round in the grass below for a while they settled down to wait at the tree's foot.

Annis was lost in her own thoughts, a hotch-potch of Kitty, Adrian, Miss de V., chemistry, and how many eggs the hens were laying, when she heard Tim growl, and glanced down to see him standing square, his hackles up, and Tony, the cautious, peering from cover behind the tree.

"Mac, I suppose," she said to herself, and waited. They would not really fight, if it were Mac, only walk round on tiptoe and make fearful gargling noises in their throats.

Then she saw something which brought her almost tumbling down the tree. For, lurching in his unsteady fashion along the path, was Kenneth, closely followed by his two tabby cats. And Tim was dead nuts on cats.

They had not seen him yet, they were mincing along with their tails in the air.

Tim crouched. Could she catch him in time? He was off—but she had him by the tail. Tony, as usual with no idea what the excitement was about, tore off barking in the wrong direction, and the danger was averted. Kenneth stood looking at Annis in mild surprise, the cats, seeing that Tim, for all his explosive snorts and struggles, was firmly held, rubbing themselves round their master's legs.

Then Tony, having found nothing to justify his barking, came racing back, and the cats were up the tree in a second. Kenneth was tickled at that, and laughed. Tim was furious, straining to get up after them. Tony did not see them, only rushed

away after some hens, which fled. Kenneth laughed the more, evidently thinking he was being provided with good entertainment.

"And really, it's a good thing they have gone up there; I hope to goodness they stay there," Annis said to herself. "For I've got to get Kenneth back again, and I couldn't manage him *and* cats *and* Tim. Someone's getting horribly careless about that door—or are they *letting* him get out by himself more now? Surely they'd have told us if they were. Anyway, I'm sure I'd better take him back."

And take him back she did, slowly, chatting and showing him things as they went. She freed Tim, and he raced on ahead, and Tony joined him. They spotted the cats' trap-door in the green gate, and were through it in a second, rushing round all the trees to make sure the cats had not arrived first by some mysterious overhead route.

The green gate was locked. Annis paused in front of it, frowning, hardly noticing that Kenneth was pulling at her hand and making the sounds which served him for speech, impatient to get in. Perhaps, she thought, it was not from the garden that he was making these escapes but from the house. Or, if it was from the garden, someone must have gone by since he had left, and seen that the gate was unlocked, and locked it without looking inside. Or perhaps . . . where on earth was Kenneth now? His arm was no longer in hers—she could not see him anywhere. A sound at her feet made her look down, and there he was, half-way through the trap-door after the dogs.

She gasped, "Kenneth, you'll get stuck!" although she knew he would not understand. Even as she

spoke, she remembered the scene in the farmyard at the beginning of term, and Pat demonstrating that where your head would go your body would follow.

Kenneth, in any case, was through, so easily that he had evidently done it before. He had turned round and was looking at her through the opening.

"So that's explained, anyway," she said to herself. "It'll have to be stopped, I suppose, though it's hard luck on the cats!"

She let herself in by the proper route. Once she was in, Kenneth took no further interest in her, but went off to the other side of the garden. She let down the trap-door and wedged it with a piece of stick. The cats would have to climb in over the wall.

She felt that someone in authority ought to be told what had happened, so she called the dogs and turned towards the farm.

The car was outside. It might be going to fetch Kitty and Susan from the station, or it might have been already and brought them back. What would she be like? Defiant or dumpy, according to whether she or Susan had won the day. Annis did not think Susan had had a chance.

Then, of a sudden she heard Kitty's violin—joyous—strong—beautiful, as it used to be.

For once, Annis did not stop to listen, enthralled. She simply wondered what on earth the change could mean, and raced in to see.

At the sight of her Kitty finished her phrase with a flourish and laid her violin tenderly in its case. In reply to Annis's inquiring look, she said, "He's a perfect old darling. Come out, and I'll tell you all about it."

She was a completely different creature from the gloomy one who had groused in the tree the day before. This evening she sat there, hunched, as usual, but this time with eagerness.

"He's a little, thin man," she began, "with funny hair that stands on end. Very—sort of—vague. I thought, well, you simply won't take any notice of me unless I'm frightfully good, so that'll be all right. He didn't seem the least bit interested in either me or Susan, at first—just vague and bored. I rather think I overdid the bad playing. If I'd just been—dull and correct—he'd have quietly shown us out. What I did do was to fumble over some chords—I'd rehearsed it all to myself lots of times, I did exactly what I'd meant to—and then played them very loud and absolutely wrong. And he clapped his hands to his ears and shrieked out, 'Stop! Stop! How *dare* you make that frightful noise in my room?'

"Susan tried to be kind and tactful, and said, 'Don't be nervous. Dr. Banks'll give you another chance.'

"And the little man whirled round in his chair and shouted, 'Nervous? She's not nervous, she's wicked! Now play it again, properly!' And I was so surprised that I did!

"Well, I'd no sooner got going again than I realised they'd simply had me on toast—bullied me into doing what they wanted me to do—so I began to play atrociously again all flat, or in the wrong key, and got my time all wrong. And this time Dr. Banks didn't say anything, just let me go on getting worse and worse until at last I dropped my bow and said, 'I'm afraid I can't remember,

any more.' I was terrified I should laugh, or cry or something. It's awfully difficult to play badly on purpose, you know. He shrugged his shoulders and said, 'Thank heaven for that.'

"He turned round to Susan and said, 'Now, Miss Cousens, suppose you leave this young woman to me. There's a nice comfortable waiting-room at the end of the passage—out of hearing, so she won't offend you with her discords. We'll come and fetch you when we've finished.' Susan went off without a word. I felt such a pig. I ought never to have let her take me, of course—you were quite right. Well, then the little man swooped round again to me, and glared, and said, 'Now perhaps you'll kindly tell me exactly why you're making these fearful sounds on purpose?'

"I tried to stick it out that I wasn't doing it on purpose at all, that I really couldn't play any better, but he simply didn't believe me. Sat there tapping with his toe on the floor, and barked out, 'I'm asking you for the truth, the truth, the truth! Can you understand what that means? Well, let's have it and waste no more of our time!'

"So at last—I don't know why—I told him. He sat and listened and nodded, and really seemed to understand. I told him the country sounds and smells and the—sort of friendly feeling of it—seemed to me to be part of music. He said, 'I quite agree with you, they are. Like this,' and whisked over to the piano and played me the darlinest little thing—I don't know what; I think he must have made it up—which just *was* the country. Then he said, 'But what about this?' and played something else—a stirring sort of thing that made me want

to fight. 'Is that the country?' he asked. And I said, 'No, it's a battlefield.' Then he played again—such a queer bit, Annis—it seemed like just a muddle at first, and then it laughed and sobbed and wasn't a muddle at all and marched away—sort of—triumphantly. He said, 'Well?' And I said, 'I suppose that's London. I don't want to make music like that.' 'But you agree it's music?' he asked. And I said of course it was. It was, it tied you up in knots even though you hated it. He twizzled round again in his chair and said, 'You see, there's other music beside country music. If you're going to be great, you must learn about it, too.'

"That was true, of course, but it didn't make me want to come to live in London, and I said so.

"He tapped with his toe again for a bit. Then he said, 'I shan't try to persuade you. But, as you're here, I would like you to play to me as well as you can. Then I can see whether you're good enough for us to think out some special plan for you.'

"So, as he'd been so awfully decent, I did. Piano first, then violin, and he accompanied me himself—*beautifully*, Annis, you can't think how *beautifully*—and then a bit of 'cello. When we'd finished, he nodded again and rang a bell and someone fetched Susan in.

"He said, 'She's promising. But not quite ready yet for a full-time work up here. Could you send her up for two whole days every week—she could stay the night in town and go home for the rest of the time. Would you agree to that, young woman? *If* you get this scholarship, of course, not if you persist in playing like a mimsey little schoolgirl.'

"I said I wouldn't mind that. Susan looked awfully shocked because I didn't jump at it, but I knew Dr. Banks would understand. I'm sure he did. Anyway, that's all settled, and it is quite true that there are other sorts of music besides my sort. I hadn't thought of that. But wasn't it amazing of him to know? That I was playing badly on purpose? Susan can't have told him, she didn't know herself, she only thought I'd lost interest. And isn't it all marvellous? I've been so miserable! I didn't want to give up music and learn domestic science or gardening or something. And yet I simply couldn't bear to be away from here altogether."

She beamed upon Annis, on the dogs, on everything. She seemed to have shaken off entirely the mild disagreeableness which had sat like a cloud on her all the term, and become the lively, impish Kitty of the year before.

Annis was so relieved that she could have hugged her, if they had been in the habit of hugging; relieved that she wasn't going away for good, even more than her talent, so very much a part of Kitty, was not in some odd way going bad, and more still that the cause of the badness was not, after all, Miss de V. She was so relieved that she forgot everything else, even her discovery about Kenneth, and just let Kitty go on and on about her day till there was not a single thing more to say.

CHAPTER TEN

SPILT MILK

WHEN Kitty said next morning, "We simply must go and ask about the piglet," Annis did not mind. Yesterday's talk, and that of the day before, had shown that her friendship with Kitty was good and solid. She had been the only person to know of Kitty's plan. She had hated Kitty's being away, and Kitty had rushed to talk to her immediately she was back. They were two people, certainly, each with her own interests. But it was simply silly to be jealous of those interests. Just as silly to be jealous of Miss de V. as it would have been to be jealous of Kitty's music. Sillier, in fact.

Miss de V. came out to meet them at the gate.

The little pig, it seemed, had almost completely recovered, and had deserted his basket in favour of the rug by the kitchen fire, on which he lay as if it belonged to him.

"Did Dr. Banks approve of the little prodigy?" Miss de Vipon asked presently.

Kitty flushed, and Annis wanted to punch Miss de Vipon's nose for her sarcasm.

"At first, no. Later on, he didn't seem to mind her," Kitty replied. "I'm going up two days a week—if I get the schol."

"Couldn't put up with you for longer?" Miss de Vipon teased. And Kitty said amiably, "Quite the other way. I couldn't put up with him."

They were still chatting when a man in rough clothes came along the lane. He stopped at the gate and said, "Excuse me, miss, may I have a look at your churn?"

"You may," Miss de Vipon told him. "But why?"

"Because," he explained in his slow, country voice, "it's queer, miss, but these last two mornings your churn's bin empty when we got 'im up to town, and me and my mate wondered if 'e'd sprung a leak. I drives the lorry and my mate loads it, and they did look very funny at us this mornin' at the milk depot when they saw 'e was empty again. Seemed to think us responsible, which we are not, so I thought I'd take a look and see, if I may."

He lumbered towards the converted garage, with Mac raging round his heels.

Kitty slipped off Lady Gay. "I say, that sounds funny! Let's go and look!"

The man was turning the churn about, and no sign of a hole could he find. He filled it with water from the tap, and they all watched for a trickle. But none came, the outside of the churn remained quite dry.

The man scratched his head. "Well, that be funny. Be there another churn, miss?"

"Yes, but that's in London—or on the road. They bring back one and take away one every day."

The man said, "Yes, miss. Yes, of course."

"So," Miss de Vipon went on, "if the churns have been empty two mornings running, they must both leak. And if this one doesn't, the chances are the other doesn't either, and the milk's vanished some other way."

The man absorbed that in silence. "Well, this 'ere churn don't leak," he said finally. "So we'll 'ave to see, miss, we'll 'ave to see what termorrow mornin' brings. Thank you, miss."

"And that," Miss de Vipon remarked as he went off, "really is most peculiar. The churns were filled as usual: I filled them myself. Where *can* the milk have got to?"

Kitty said excitedly, "It must be a tramp! Can't you imagine him, prising the top off and dipping in his dirty little tin mug?"

"And dipping and dipping till he's drunk four gallons at a go?" Miss de V. and Annis crowed with delight. "That won't do, Kit! Think again."

Kitty did. "He wouldn't do that at all!" she said indignantly. "He'd drink one gallon p'r'aps, and the rest he'd take away with him."

"Slung round him on bits of string, in paraffin cans! Kit, your jaunt to town has turned your head."

Kitty was unperturbed. "It's you that's silly, not me! I didn't say he'd take it far away. He's got a cache, I expect. Hides it there, drinks it when he wants to, and sallies forth in the evenings and sets light to haystacks! There, what about that?"

"Uses the haystacks to cook his rice puddings on, in fact! Kitty, you're an ass!"

"I'm not at all!" Kitty was eagerly chasing her own string of clues. "I'm on a scent. Definitely on a scent!"

The word set Annis's nostrils twitching. She had poked into the cowshed after the man. The cows were out, but the floors had not been cleaned, probably for days. They were ankle-deep in filthy

straw, and outside a heap of manure was piled against the wall where the cows could hardly fail to walk through it on their way to and from the shed. Not that it could make them any dirtier, she reflected, than the shed itself. She thought of Cherry, in his wide, clean stable that smelt, only sweetly, of hay and horse, and thanked her stars she had refused this as a home for him.

As they rode away, Annis said, "Don't you hate her being sarky to you like that?"

Kitty squared her shoulders. She said stoutly, "No. She's only teasing; she doesn't mean to be unkind. I think it's rather good to be—poked at—like she does. She often does it, if I seem to be getting bumptious. I don't want to turn into a conceited ape."

"You never would!" Annis said hotly. "You've got too much sense. I think she ought to consider your feelings a bit and not twit you in front of people, anyway."

Kitty bowed elaborately over Lady Gay's neck. "Thank you, kind friend. She's not very interested in anybody's feelings but her own, I believe."

"And yet you like her so much, knowing that?"

Kitty shot a little smiling glance at her. "Yes, I like her. Tremendously. I *should* hate her poking fun, if I didn't, of course. But I shouldn't go to her if I wanted help. She'd slide away."

"And yet you like her?" Annis could only repeat.

Kitty repeated too, "Yes, I like her. She hasn't got any of the things that *really* put me off people—fat ankles, a squint, an awful voice, dishonesty like Sheila Matilda's—and she likes me. I suppose that ought not to make a difference, but it does.

I don't think I could ever hug a hopeless passion for someone who didn't like me a bit."

They began to giggle, Kitty because she was really amused, Annis because she was so glad to know that Kitty *would* come to *her* for help if she wanted it.

Kitty was regarding her impishly. "Idiot, why are you pretending anybody *you* like must be absolutely perfect? You know quite well *I'm* not, anyway. You want to wring my neck sometimes, I'm sure. And I want to stick pins into you when you're pompous. But we like each other—quite—don't we—don't we?"

Annis grinned. "Sometimes," she agreed. And Kitty gave Cherry a spank with her stick which made him dart away, Lady Gay after him in an instant.

Meanwhile, the day of the Agricultural Show was drawing nearer. There was much talk at the farm of which animals were to be shown and who was to show them. It was one of those country shows which take in everything—prize cows, Shire horses, handy hunters, ponies, sheep and farm poultry, rabbits and pigeons, even ferrets; pigs, implements and carts; butter and cheese and jam; everything, in fact, which makes up the life of an English farm.

Annis was showing Cherry in the pony class, and Kitty riding Lady Gay in the Handy Hunters, and both and several others had entered for events in the gymkhana.

They had been practising for weeks before. On the actual day, Kitty and Annis had agreed to be up

at four in the morning, exercising their charges so that they should not be too fresh, then grooming them and plaiting Lady Gay's mane.

"If you wait till six, as most people do, there's not quite time to get them rested again, and they don't put up their very best performance," Kitty laid down the law. "And if you don't exercise them at all they're too full of beans to behave well in the ring."

Annis turned in early the night before, and set an alarm clock for half-past three.

The sky was grey and cold when she awoke. By the time she had sleepily washed and pulled on clothes, it was blue-green above and gold near the horizon, crisp and clear. She gulped cornflakes and cold milk near the window, and watched a red rim of sun come up behind the tree-tops.

There were men about already in the farmyard, getting ready for milking. The sight of them set Annis thinking about Miss de Vipon's empty churn. Funny; a whole string of mysteries coming on top of one another like this—Hugh's pigeon-house door left open, stacks fired, and now milk stolen. They did not appear to have any connection with one another, and yet, surely, they must have. Suppose Miss de Vipon *was* a witch—or, to put it in more modern language, an eccentric person who went about doing queer things because she couldn't help it! Still, surely she would not steal her own milk? One could not tell.

Near the pigsty she heard a chorus of expectant grunts and squeals, and the next minute Hugh came striding across, a milk-churn balanced on his shoulder. He kicked the door open, shoved the

crowding piglets aside with his foot, and poured the milk into their trough.

That was funny. It wasn't Hugh's job to feed the pigs. And one didn't as a rule give them fresh milk. Perhaps it was buttermilk. Or perhaps somehow it had been overlooked and gone sour. The pigs seemed to appreciate it, anyway. One of them climbed right into the trough and had to be hauled out.

It was Annis's chuckle at that which made Hugh notice her. He glanced up, and she realised in one breath that his expression was that of a naughty schoolboy caught at the very climax of a prank; in the next, that there wasn't a doubt that he was up to something; and in the next, that the churn had "E. de V." painted on it in blue letters.

Hugh stood the empty churn on the ground and a grin spread over his face. He said amiably, "So what, Aniseed?"

Annis could not help grinning too. "That's what I might have asked, isn't it, if I'd been quick enough?"

Hugh said, "It's a good thing it was you that caught me and not Kit. She'd have turned the churn upside down on my head!"

"But what *are* you doing?" Annis persisted. "I can see it's Miss de V.'s milk. And I can see it's gone to the pigs instead of to London. What I can't see is, why?"

Hugh swept an arm out widely in the direction of the cottage. "Isn't that all it's fit for? Have you seen the inside of her shed?"

Annis wrinkled up her nose, and he went on, "Exactly. I said—rashly, I'll admit—that her milk could go up with ours. Ours is Tuberculin Tested,

Grade A., as near germ-free as any milk can be. I thought she'd let one of my chaps look after her cows, but she wouldn't hear of it. Wants to be boss of her own show—and what a boss! Well, so she can be, and I'll pay her market price for her milk; as I said I would. Where it goes to is my concern."

He thrust his jaw out and scowled as though Annis might have been a Government Inspector. She chuckled, seeing his point of view exactly; his spotless cow-house, electric-milker, shining steel tubes; his milk untouched by even the cleanest human hands, the very pitch of perfection in milk—all made of no account by this one germ-laden specimen which, mixed with it at the depot, would contaminate the lot.

She said, "But, Hugh, she's bound to find out!"

Hugh's chin came out farther than ever. "I don't see why she should! She gets her money, and I get my milk!"

"What about the lorryman?" Annis blurted.

Hugh looked mystified. "Well, what about him?"

"He's afraid he'll be accused of stealing the milk. He went to the cottage to see if the churn leaked."

They stared at each other, Annis greatly tickled, Hugh in consternation. Then they both laughed.

"I thought he'd realise by the weight that it was empty and just think someone had forgotten to take it in and fill it," said Hugh. "Confound the silly fellow—he's too clever by a whole lot!"

Annis was still laughing, wondering what he would do.

"I suppose I shall have to tell her," he said at

last. "I was trying to spare her feelings, but I shall have to get down to making her reform, which is far more difficult."

"Some time, you will," Annis agreed. "But it won't hurt them to look about for an explanation for a little while, will it?" She told him about Kitty's imaginary tramp.

When she mentioned the haystack fires a tired look came into Hugh's eyes. "I only wish we could get to the bottom of that," he said. "It's worrying not to know. I can assure you I'm not guilty of that, anyway. Don't give me away, Aniseed, not yet. I'm doing it when the men are milking; I don't think anyone's spotted it yet. I'll have to think of some way of telling the old girl tactfully."

Annis promised to keep a still tongue, and hoped that Kitty would not embarrass her with too many theories. As she trudged across to the stable, she marvelled at the way Miss de Vipon seemed to have diminished, lately, in importance—"the old girl . . . just something new . . . not very interested in anybody's feelings except her own. . . ."

Kitty's voice greeted her lightheartedly, "Sleepy-head! I've done Lady Gay, and half done Cherry too!"

CHAPTER ELEVEN

THE SHOW

THERE was no school on the day of the show. The visiting teachers had a holiday; the rest—pupils and Foresters—were on the show ground as early as they could get there.

The ground was a big field shut off from the view of unauthorised watchers by high screens of sacking. Along one side were improvised stalls for horses and cattle, pigs and sheep; towards one end of it, rings for judging them. Farm implements, mostly painted brilliant red and green, made a splash of colour in one corner. Rabbits and such, in hutches, were in another, and most of the younger members of the school were there, waiting to show their pets.

Mr. Forester looked far more farmer than school-master, bustling about among his animals and the boys—Arthur and Martin, Joe and Peter, Philip and Pat—who were showing them. Mrs. Forester, in a light tweed coat over a cotton dress, might have been any pleasant country lady; gentler than the horsey spinsters who strode round in riding habits, more interesting than the cooing wives of squires, vicars, and doctors, Annis thought she was by far the most attractive of them all. The Triplets, in jodhpurs and little jockey caps, stayed by her until the time came for them to mount their diminutive ponies.

Margaret, in a white coat, was busy among the butter and cheese, a competent and very charming dairymaid. Ruth, frowning in her earnestness, chivvied her Guides about their business of selling programmes.

Kitty and Annis, with no special duties, roamed about, with Tim and Tony, on leads for once, for safety among the trampling feet, pulling them this way and that.

They stopped at one point to make room for a big pink sow who, with her litter, was being coaxed and thwacked into her enclosure by Philip and Pat. Highly indignant at the whole procedure, she herded her piglets behind her and stood broadside-on to protect them.

The girls and their dogs headed off the little pigs, who were only too ready to bolt in any direction but the right one. They had them at last making properly for their stall, when they heard a terrific anxious squealing. The crowd, in fits of laughter, swayed apart to allow passage to another piglet, who galloped bald-headed straight towards them. It was fat, it was pink, it had a smart blue ribbon round its neck, and it was hotly pursued by a figure in green linen, whose shock of grey hair was blown on end as she ran, and who dragged after her a reluctant, though well-grown, woolly lamb.

The sow dived into her temporary home, her family flowing round her. The little strange pig, with a leap and a despairing squeal, butted his way among them just before the hurdle was pulled across to shut them in.

Miss de Vipon, pulling up, was met by the indignant faces of Philip and Pat.

"We can't," they informed her, "have that thing in here! We've entered a litter of ten, and he makes eleven!"

"I didn't mean you to have him!" she protested. "I brought him—and Byron too—for the pets' section. But, though there is a class for hand-fed lambs, there isn't one for pigs. I've always been told that pigs were intelligent, but I'm bothered if I thought they could understand what one said! The minute he heard he couldn't be a pet, he struggled out of my arms and bolted for his mother, though he hasn't seen her since the day he was born!"

The small boys were regarding her seriously. "You mean," Pat said severely, "you dropped him!"

"And, the pets' section being next door, there wasn't anywhere else much he could bolt to!" Philip put in.

"So," they added in chorus, "it really wasn't particularly intelligent of him at all!"

Miss de Vipon appeared to be sobered by their downrightness. "Well, he did at any rate recognise that these were his own kind," she said meekly. "He doesn't look bad, does he, when you see him with his brothers?"

The small boys turned to look; and indeed, except for his bow and a somewhat less shining pinkness, the pet piglet could not have been distinguished from the rest.

Philip agreed, "He's quite good, for a runt."

"Couldn't you let him stay?" Miss de Vipon asked. "He'll be disappointed if he can't be shown at all, and he really is a credit to his mother."

"Well, we might ask," Pat said. "You get more

marks the bigger the litter, if it's a good litter. I'll go and see."

He came out of the pen and stumped away to the judges' tent.

Annis and Kitty leaned over to look at the pigs.

"Aren't they marvellously clean!" Annis said.

Philip grunted. "So they ought to be! We got up at six and washed the whole lot of them, mother and all, with Lux. You should have heard the squealing."

Miss de Vipon said, "You deserve a prize." And he corrected her gravely, "I think the old sow does. She's a good sow and it's a good litter."

Kitty was looking a little indignant and Annis was controlling her chuckles at the way the youngsters, solemnly and quite without malice, squashed the visitor's facetiousness. They were not trying to be rude; they had simply formed the opinion that she did not know much about shows.

Pat came back in a few minutes, carrying a bucket of water, a towel, and a piece of soap.

"They say there's no objection to our showing him if we're sure he's one of the family," he announced. "So we will. Only we must try to get him the same colour as the rest of them, or they won't believe us. This is the best I can do. I hope it has the same effect as the Lux!"

Miss de Vipon was unsquashable. "I'm afraid it'll shrink him!" she said.

Wading expertly among the piglets, he caught the recruit by its hind leg, and, taking no notice of its uplifted voice, removed its blue ribbon which was handed to Miss de Vipon, then proceeded to lather it all over. A small crowd, attracted by the

noise, gathered to watch. When Annis and Kitty strolled away, the little beast was enveloped in the towel on Pat's knee.

They watched the judging of some of the cattle, and saw Hugh lead in Mirabel and read out her milking records.

"Doesn't he look nice!" Annis exclaimed, and Kitty said, "*He?* It's a *cow!*"

"I meant Hugh!" Annis said meekly, and Kitty snorted, "What on earth are you looking at *him* for? It's Mirabel who's being shown!"

Kitty clapped with enthusiasm, though, when Mirabel was awarded her first prize, and shouted, "Good old Hugh!" as they went by. The Foresters were funny about each other, Annis reflected. Solid achievement was greeted with rejoicing and unstinted praise. Mere compliments were snorted at.

They passed Adrian, busily sketching animals, and Annis begged a look into his book. Kitty, who never could pretend interest in Adrian's doings, went off to see how Margaret and her cheeses were getting on. She came back with the information that one of these, too, made from Mirabel's milk, had taken a first prize.

"We do things *well*, when we do them at all," she announced smugly, and Annis punched her amiably on the head.

On the way back past the pig pens, they saw that the old sow now sported a blue medallion on her back.

"What did I tell you? There's another first! Though I dare say it would only have been a second without Miss de V.'s contribution!"

Annis chuckled to herself, "Contribushuns, you

mean," thinking of the milk which had helped to make the piglets fat. They were all asleep now, side to side, head to tail, like a packet of sausages. The pet was indistinguishable from the rest.

After a picnic lunch in and around the cars, all those who were taking part in the gymkhana went to watch at the entrance for their ponies, which were being brought down from the farm by the men. Annis thought she had never seen Lady Gay looking so well, so smart and sleek with her polished bay coat and the little plaits which bobbed jauntily against her neck.

Cherry she was disappointed with. Among the more slender hunters he looked stubby and short, and against the perky children's ponies he was heavy. She did not think he could possibly win a thing. As she took his rein he wickered through his nose and nuzzled into her pocket for sugar. He was a darling, even if he was not precisely handsome. She rubbed her cheek against his neck.

The serious business of judging stock was over by midday, and the afternoon was for enjoyment. More people came. The ringsides were crowded.

The very small children came first. The Triplets, whose first public appearance it was, sat fat and solemn on three little Shetland ponies which had been well exercised at intervals during the morning, so that they should not be uncontrollable as Shetlands often are. They walked and trotted and cantered with beautiful unconcern—why not. They had ridden on ponies, in baskets and then otherwise, ever since they could be propped in a sitting position.

"They'll make a marvellous team for the Hunter Trials, in ten years' time!" Mr. Forester was heard

to murmur as the line of a dozen or so small things went round before him.

This time they won no prizes. They were by far the youngest of the parade. But neither they nor anyone else minded. When they were bigger there would be plenty of time for that.

Kitty and Lady Gay went round competently in the Handy Hunters. Kitty was less nervous than last year, and kicked the mare up to go faster—with the result that instead of coming in second she tied with two others, both grown-ups, in having only one fault and heading the list.

Children's jumping was the event Annis was most interested in. Cherry, for all his sturdiness, was a splendid jumper. He was not showy, but he got over. She thought he could beat most of the local ponies; but there were several strangers, on slim, leggy, long-tailed mounts, who looked to be dangerous rivals.

Mrs. Forester tied Annis's number on her back, and she swung herself up and sat ready.

There were two competitors before her. She could not see them well from where she sat, but the first, a boy, came in with a rueful grin.

"Six faults, I think," he said. "They're pretty stiff. The double one's horrid."

The next, a well-got-up girl on one of the long-tailed ponies, was flushed and sulky. "I do wish people wouldn't applaud! And why *must* they have the band playing—it's enough to put any pony off!"

Annis smiled to herself. She did not think Cherry would mind the band. Kitty had played her violin at him in the field, the other day to see, and he had waggled his ears as though there were flies on them,

but had jumped as well as ever. And as for applause, she was sure he would rather like it.

The megaphone was droning out her name. "Number Three. Cherry. Owned and ridden by Miss Annie Best." Bother them!—why couldn't they get her name right? Nobody ever did. It sounded frightfully important all the same. *Now*, Cherry, it's only a brush hedge; you've done many worse than this.

She touched him with her heels—checked him—dropped her hands—and he was over as smoothly as a swallow flies.

She heard someone say, "A pretty little jumper!" and someone farther on, "It's an easy one, of course!"

The next was a pole, and not too high. Cherry flicked his ears and cleared it with contempt. The next, a wall, seemed enormous, and was like no wall the pony had ever seen. He would not hurry, for all Annis's coaxing and kicking; sidled up to have a look at it. "You'll never get over, you old idiot!" Annis scolded him. "You'd better come away and take a run at it properly!"

But it was just as if Cherry had said, "Nonsense, that's all right!" For he simply changed his feet and gave a spring. Annis waited for the click of his heels against the topmost brick; looked back over her shoulder because she had not heard it; and found the wall intact behind her and the pony cantering on.

The crowd at the ringside were laughing. Someone said, "He ought to have been a kangaroo!"

Annis patted Cherry's neck, and on they went to the next, which was a bank with a ditch on the far

side, the sort of thing which, taken flying, might land horse and rider in a heap. She said, "Steady, now!" and Cherry realised that caution was needed. He gathered himself together at the top of the bank, and cleared the ditch neatly.

Someone beside them murmured, "Stop—look—listen . . ." and, leaving the end of the sentence behind, Annis grinned and pulled the pony in for the next, which was the double—over a pole—that was all right—change feet—and over again—tricky, but Cherry didn't mind.

He did not like the next—in and out—where he had to be turned at right angles between one jump and the next—twiddled his ears and tossed his head—several of the handy hunters had baulked at this one—it had been higher then, but that did not really make it more awkward for a larger horse—come on, Cherry, you're such a good dodger, you won't let this get you down—over—and over again—oh, good!

That was the worst of all. The next was a hedge, an easy one at the end of a straight bit, to finish with a flourish. Cherry did it—cantered on—trotted—jigged—and walked decorously through the gangway in the smiling crowd.

The megaphone intoned—"Cherry—owned and ridden by Miss Annie Best—a clear round!"

A steward bustled up. "You'll probably have to go round again—that is, unless no one else does as well—nice performance you gave. I should get down and rest him now."

Annis did so, and found Kitty there to pat her back and Cherry's both at once, and Hugh to take Cherry's rein and give him to Bullen to hold with

the rest, and Adrian standing away putting last touches to his drawings of the jumps.

Kitty said, "Let's go and watch the others!" and they threaded their way back, Annis dodging friendly thumps from people who recognised her.

Annis did have to ride again. Two other competitors did clear rounds, and the three of them had to go over the course with all the movable jumps a little higher.

The other two were both boys, strangers to Annis but knowing each other, and both on much better-looking ponies than Cherry.

Annis saw Kitty at the entrance to the ring, throwing back her hair in her own funny little gesture of defiance. Annis felt just the same, but one cannot toss one's head in a bowler hat. It was fun, to be up against something, not just to win easily. Cherry plodded quietly in and had a look round. "Oh, we're here again, are we?" he seemed to say. "Well, we'll show off as far as we are able," and he flicked himself over the first hedge.

Annis did not feel nervous, only keyed-up in a steady, adventurous sort of way. She was glad, for she knew the rider's feelings were always, somehow, conveyed to her horse; that if she had been frightened, Cherry would have been frightened too.

She did not check him before the pole, for he needed a run at it now it was higher, and with the extra impetus he took it easily. Would he consent to go fast at the wall? For if he didn't, she was doubtful whether he could do it. Yes, he had recognised it this time and did not want to investigate—she gave him a dig with her heels and he had cleared that, too, and did not seem at all upset by the

shouts of applause. A nice, calm little chap whose head was not easily turned.

The bank and ditch was the same as before and as easily negotiated. The poles of the double were higher, but here Cherry's kangaroo-like action was useful and helped him over. The right-angled one was higher too, but he remembered it and did not hesitate—he really was a good, intelligent pony—and the last hedge was easy.

A clear round again. Kitty was jumping up and down and beaming in the clapping crowd. Annis patted Cherry and flung Bullen his rein, and hurried away to watch her rivals.

The first boy knocked down the top brick of the wall and the second pole of the double, and retired, making a face at himself.

The second did a round as faultless as Annis's own.

He jumped down at the entrance and joined her. "What do we do now? Call it a draw?"

Two of the judges, who had been conferring, bustled up.

"Would you like to do the movable jumps again, leaving out the others? Just once, to decide it?"

"And the first hedge," Annis put in, "just to give us a start?"

The boy, a thin, keen-looking youngster, agreed.

His eyebrows were twitching. Annis was sure he was more strung up about it than she was. If only she and Cherry could stay calm. Bullen was a nice placid person, he wouldn't have excited the pony in the interval. Here they came, Cherry picking his way as though he were walking out of his own stable.

The stewards were building more bricks on the wall and putting the poles up. Annis waited at the entrance, and Cherry looked about in the quiet, interested way he always did if there was nothing else to do. She said to him, "Now, pony, do your very, *very* best!" and he turned one ear back towards her as if to say, "Well, don't I always?" Obediently, he went cleanly over the hedge.

Annis did not let him slow up, but took him straight at the pole. It looked almost impossibly high. Cherry did not think so—he hunched himself up so that she could actually feel the strength in his stubby hindquarters—Annis, sure of her own balance, shifted her weight to help him—they were over—were they? Out of the corner of her eye she could see the pole, a white horizontal streak as it had been before. You musn't stop, Cherry, you must go on like the wind, or you'll never clear that ugly pink and grey erection in front.

Cherry liked jumping, there wasn't a doubt. He had only to see that wall, now, to make for it. Annis had never taken a jump so fast in her life. She concentrated on helping him—moved a bit—let him have his head yet felt its motion on her hands—heavens, she had shifted a bit too much—awful, *awful* if she came off now and spoilt it all—she recovered herself as he landed, and on they went, followed by shouts of joy. She couldn't look round, but it must be all right, for the crowd to be so pleased.

She realised suddenly that Cherry was making for the bank and ditch, which was to be avoided this time. She pulled him round with knee and wrist, to go wide of it—impossible, in such a gallop,

to pass it on the inside. He must be checked now, he couldn't do the double at this rate.

Cherry did not want to slow up. He was enjoying himself. He was still going a bit too fast when they arrived at the jump. He took the first pole, high though it was, in his stride—saw the second—pecked—steadied himself and sprang, but just too soon. Annis heard the click she had been listening for all the afternoon, and then the thud of the pole bouncing on the ground.

Well, that was that. It wasn't Cherry's fault, it was hers, for letting him get a thought too excited. She patted his neck and said, "Never mind, old thing, it was a good effort all the same!"

The crowd was smiling and shouting the same thing as she passed. How would he take the in-and-out, after that setback?

He was sobered. He took it perfectly.

Bullen took the pony from her at once as she rode in, so that she could watch her rival's round.

The pony, a shiny black, was dancing, and the boy holding it rather tight. It tossed its head at the hedge before going over—took the pole with the flying hoofs—went at the wall for all it was worth—it was a plucky pony—its rider gave it a whack with his stick a second too soon—unnecessarily, too, it had appeared—and the two top bricks were down behind it.

Level—or did two bricks count two faults and the pole only one? Annis wasn't sure.

The black pony and his master were both put out. They tore round the field towards the double.

Kitty, at Annis's side, was clasping her hands and

muttering, "It's far too fast—*far* too fast. Oh, I hope he doesn't hurt him!"

The pony had tried to clear both jumps together in a desperate leap—stumbled—and he and the boy were down together in a medley of flying poles.

Annis and Kitty ran out with others to help. But no damage was done—the pony was up in a minute and caught, and stood trembling, while a steward ran practised hands over his limbs. The boy was up too, white and shaken and simply furious, but unhurt.

Annis had quite given up the idea of winning when Cherry had knocked down the pole—and here she was, the winner after all, with everyone smiling and congratulating her. She seized Kitty's hand and the two of them raced across the corner of the field to find Cherry and reward him with sugar.

On the way, Kitty pulled up and began to walk slowly. "Listen!" she said, and Annis heard a conversation which was going on behind—or inside, she could not see which—one of the cars.

A shrill female voice was holding forth, "You'd think it was a cranky school, wouldn't you—Farm School, they call it—but really it's the most marvellous place! Run on the lines of a self-supporting country house in the time of—well, Sir Thomas More, about, I should say! They grow their own food and look after their own animals, all in the most up-to-date way—and have the most amazingly highly qualified people to teach! In fact, you simply can't get on as a teacher unless you're doing some frightfully original work of your own, I'm told! *And* such a high standard—you saw how that girl rode! And it's the same in everything—schoolwork,

housework, rearing pigs and things—or art or music! *And* such nice manners. . . . I've got Marjorie's name down already, though she's not a year old!"

Kitty poked Annis and strutted, and Annis laughed and pulled her on. Kitty could lap up any amount of praise about her family's school. But it was fun to have been a credit to it, all the same.

Cherry was standing in one of the canvas-protected stalls, and Bullen was rubbing him over, making appreciative noises through his teeth. Kitty flung herself at him, and hugged his nose. He extricated it, patiently, and poked it into one of Annis's pockets. Annis, rubbing her cheek against him as he munched, thought what a lovely comfortable smell a horse had. Even a van horse in London, now and always, could make her nostrils twitch, on a warm, steamy day, with the memory of her schooldays.

A voice brought her out of her thoughts.

"Here he is, that's the one! Hey, young lady, are you the owner of this pony?"

Annis came into the open again. "Yes, he's my pony. Why?"

"Will you sell him?"

Her face flamed suddenly. It seemed, at this moment of victory, like being asked to sell her best friend.

She shook her head. "He's not for sale."

The man who had spoken did not go away. He was a big, burly man who looked as though he had a great deal of money. The lady with him was beautifully dressed and made up and probably, Annis thought, really quite pretty underneath.

They had funny, rough voices which did not go with their clothes.

"I'll pay you anything within reason," the man was saying. "That pony would teach any child to jump. Not that you didn't ride him well, young lady, you did. Very well indeed. But he's a natural jumper. Now my boy—he's twelve—hasn't any nerve with horses, and I've made up my mind he shall hunt. Why shouldn't he? He can have the finest hunters in the land, if only he'll ride 'em. But he won't. I think he would ride that one, though. It's safe and it's clever, he's only got to sit on it. Mind you, it's not a handsome pony, and it's not a fast pony. You'd do with a better one, a pretty rider like you. I'll buy this one off you, and give you enough for him to get yourself a real high-stepper!"

Annis was tempted. She might even buy a hunter—one of those long-legged creatures, lovelier far than Lady Gay, whom she had watched flashing past earlier in the afternoon. Cherry would never flash—only plod quietly—and get there in the end.

Cherry turned his head suddenly with an inquiring look. Where was the rest of that sugar? Kitty was standing beside him, listening.

Annis said firmly, "I'm sorry, but he's really not for sale. I'm far too fond of him."

The lady pouted. The man breathed heavily, and said, "You'd be just as fond of a new one in a week. Where's your father? I'd like to talk to him about it."

Annis said, "He's in London. He doesn't live here. And he wouldn't interfere about this. Cherry's *my* pony, not his."

A gleam of amusement in the lady's pretty eyes, and the disappointment, like a sulky schoolboy's, in the big man's face, moved her to add, "But if you'll let Mr. Forester teach your boy to ride, I'll lend him Cherry to jump on!"

The man growled suspiciously, "Who's Mr. Forester?"

"He's the head of the Farm School. That's where I am. He taught me. I'd never been on a pony two years ago. I think he could teach anyone, however nervous they were. He's over by the judges' tent, watching. Brown tweed, and a beard——"

The man looked dubious. The lady took him by the arm. Presently Annis saw them in conversation with Kitty's father.

Kitty said, "Good, that'll be another pupil, I expect! I hope he isn't too awful. Let's go and watch again, shall we?"

They watched Arthur and Valerie scrape into second place in the V.C. race, and all sorts of acquaintances competing in the Farmers' Jumping. They took part themselves, with much laughter, in Musical Chairs, cantering round in a circle while the band played and galloping wildly for the nearest chair when it stopped, and rolling off and sitting down. Annis was "out" quite early, having collided with Peter on the edge of a chair and been forced off by his greater bulk. Kitty did not survive much longer.

There was the prize-giving and the parade of winners, proudly, with their rosettes. Then tiredly, happily home, some in cars, some riding their horses at walking pace.

Annis and Kitty rode, with some of the others.

They passed Miss de Vipon, waiting for a bus, and Kitty pulled up to speak to her.

"What have you done with the pets?"

She spread out her hands, a gesture from her French forebears. "Piglet's deserted me, as you saw. And Shepherd's taken Byron to return to the flock. He seems to think the very limp won't handicap him, and he's too big for me now. Nibbles at everything. So there's only my faithful Mac and the blackbird—oh, and I bought a calf this afternoon."

"That'll be Hugh's doing," Annis thought, amused. "For her to use up the surplus milk on."

Lady Gay would not wait for more talk. As they jogged on, Kitty said, "Decent of her to come!"

Martin commented, "A bit silly, to bring those animals—I mean, grown up people *don't* show pets——"

"She couldn't know that!" Kitty flared.

Valerie shrugged. "Anyone would know, with common sense! It was turning the pets' section into a joke, and you know how deadly earnest the kids are about it!"

"Do them good," Kitty said dangerously, "to be laughed at a bit!"

"Oh, don't let's squabble about that old crank!" Arthur begged. "Don't let's squabble about anything on a day like this!"

Eagerly, Valerie backed him up, shouting down Kitty's protest that Miss de V. wasn't a crank at all. "A ripping day, from beginning to end!" And they fell to discussing it.

CHAPTER TWELVE

ANOTHER SOLUTION

THERE was a pause in farm activities after the Show—hay had been carried, soft fruits picked, and plums and apples were not yet ready; and while the routine milking, feeding, and so on continued as usual, there was a feeling of leisure in the air.

This was just as well, for if farm work was down, school work was very much up. Senior Schools was imminent, Valerie was going up for a Cambridge Scholarship, Arthur for an Oxford one, Kitty was putting every minute now into practice for her music exam. It seemed almost as if her voluntary rest from it had done her good, and the relief that it was over came out in bursts of exultant melody, or sometimes in the dogged repetition of exercises or of some difficult passage; for Kitty, when she would, could work with a concentration which was surprising in such a mercurial person.

She still went often to the cottage, and Annis, although she sat with determination on her jealousy of Miss de Vipon, realising that to give it play would do more harm than good, could not help feeling a little lonely, and, in spite of herself, resentful. What *could* Kitty see in "that old crank" to be so fond of?

She would climb the cherry-tree and read in its branches; or play tennis with the boys, who welcomed her because she played a steady game and

was even-tempered; or watch Adrian, with fascination, at his modelling.

One model specially pleased her at this time—a horse taking off for a jump. Adrian would let her look on at him as he worked, but he would not talk about that model. He finished it, roughly, in clay, and then, after much talk with Mr. Jackson about it, was supplied with a block of stone, out of which he proceeded to chip it. Only after many days' progress was Annis sure of what she had been too modest to let herself suspect before, that the pony was Cherry and the rider herself. The roughness of the pony's coat, his stubby build, the strength in his hindquarters, the courage and intelligence of his poise; the careful grace of the rider shifting her weight to help him—they were all there. Annis thought it was quite perfect.

"There's an exhibition, next month," Adrian said, "at Kensington, for people from all the Art Schools. This isn't an Art School, of course, but old Jackson says he thinks they might take it, if it's good enough. I don't suppose it is—they'll probably chuck it out. But there's no harm in trying."

"They'll be just silly if they do," Annis protested.

"No. We like it," Adrian acknowledged; "but we haven't seen it against really good stuff. It might look simply awful. It's not *quite* as I wanted it, even now."

"It's very, very, very good," Annis said firmly. And added meditatively, "I wonder why it is that people do things so well here. Almost everyone, it seems to me, is good at something. Quite everyone—I can't think of one who isn't. At my old school

there were masses of mediocre people who were no good at anything at all!"

"There aren't masses of people here at all, to start with," Adrian grinned.

"D'you mean, we're 'all—fairly bright sort of people even before we come? That it's us, not the school? Because," Annis stated flatly, "I don't believe it! Look at Peter—well; you didn't know him, but he was awful, at first!"

"I think there's something in it, though," Adrian said. "If our parents hadn't more sense than most parents they wouldn't send us here. And we've probably inherited some of it. But it's mostly the fact that they let us do what we want to do."

Annis agreed. "I suppose that has a bit to do with it."

"It has everything," Adrian insisted. "At what ordinary school should I be allowed to put in as much time as ever I liked at this job, instead of writing essays on *A Sense of Humour* or the *Character of Tennyson as Shown by his Poems*, or learning bits of *Shakespeare by heart* or slogging at problems of *Algebra*? I can read and write and do enough arithmetic to do my shopping with, and I understand quite a lot about geometry. I know heaps about the *History of Art*, and therefore quite a bit of ordinary history, of other countries as well as England, which is more than most people do. I pick up bits of geography here and there when I want them, and some chemistry when I learn about paints and pots, and geology when I'm interested in kinds of stone, and I don't forget what I learn, because it's all stuff I want, and I think about it. By the time I leave, I shall be jolly well educated.

So will you—educated for the things you want to know, and for living with people who do other things, because we're all different here and we get to tolerate each other—not to think that anyone who can't play games or talk French or pass exams or whatever the fashion may be is mud."

"People did rather do that at my old school!" Annis acknowledged. "If you didn't fit in with the general pattern, you were a 'Bolshie' or something, and no one wanted to know you."

"M! Here, you can be as different as you like and no one even remarks on it. They're so sensible, the Foresters and the rest of them—they leave us alone for a bit to find out what we want to do—and then teach us to do it as well as ever it can be done—your riding—my modelling—Margaret's cheese-making—Valerie's Cambridge schol—whatever it is. I believe people are only mediocre at things they can't be bothered with and just have to do because everyone else does. I believe everyone has it in him to be really good at something. Lord, how I do hold forth once I get going! I tell you one thing you're good at, Anisced—listening!"

Annis said, "It's all one *can* do, when you've started! But if it's a talent, I'll come to you to cultivate it! The riding was Cherry, not me; there's only it and games that I *am* good at. Not bad at chemistry, p'r'aps."

Adrian flung her a glance of amusement and affection which pleased her ridiculously, and went on with his work.

It was on her way home after watching Adrian that Annis again met Kenneth, and realised with

a pang of alarm that the manner of his escape had gone right out of her head in the excitement of the days which followed her discovery, and she had told no one of it. Her wedge of wood must have come out, leaving Kenneth free again to go in and out of his garden as he pleased.

This time he was farther from the farm than she had ever seen him, shambling across the fields as though making for some definite place. He could not be, of course, because he never went out and could not know any place to make for. However, when she talked to him and tried to turn him back, he frowned and made grumbling noises and flatly refused to go, but started forward again in his original direction.

So Annis went with him, feeling rather responsible for the whole business. He did not seem to welcome her as he generally did, was not interested in what she said, or even in the dogs, who ranged along the hedges in hopes of rabbits, which were so used to them that they popped impudently out of their holes the minute Tony's snuffling nose was withdrawn and past.

At the end of the big field Kenneth paused, looked round, and pointed with his hand, evidently at something which pleased him. He took no notice of Annis; he seemed to be pointing for his own benefit, not for hers. Instead of climbing the stile into the lane, he set off across the stubble alongside the hedge.

Annis followed him. If he wanted to go that way it was no matter; there was a gate in the corner of the field. Besides, she was curious as to what he thought he had seen.

He led the way through the gate. In the corner of the next field were two stacks, and it was soon evident that they were the attraction. Annis wondered if he had mistaken them for the farm buildings, for they were long and low. He made straight for them. In front of them, he paused, as though deciding which he liked best; then dived for the biggest, fumbling in his pockets as he went—and then, to Annis's utter horror, struck a match and held it to the side of the stack—and another, and another, before she could catch him up.

Mercifully, there had been more rain, and the hay did no more than smoulder. But supposing it had been dry, or there had been wind to fan the glowing stumps and carry the flame into the interior of the stacks!

The question was, what to do? Annis advanced, and said firmly, "Kenneth, you mustn't do that! It's bad of you! Bad, do you understand?" It was what she would have said to a dog who had done something wrong.

He looked at her over his shoulder, grinning, and struck another match. Annis grabbed at it, and he threw it towards the hay, and it went out. He made a sound of annoyance and tried again—and Annis tried to get hold of the box but he eluded her. He had it grasped in one hand. Annis had seen the boys, in the days of Peter's fatness, taking sweets from him by force. She got hold of Kenneth's fist and bent it downwards—he was not very strong—and the matchbox dropped out and she put her foot on it.

The two of them stood staring at each other. Annis felt such a pig, for the half-witted boy was

astounded, almost crying, quite without understanding why his treasure had been snatched away and his entertainment ended. He did not fight, as she had feared he might, just stood abashed and blubbering, like a very small child disappointed.

She picked up the matches and put them in her own pocket; then took a friendly hold of Kenneth's arm.

"Time we went home now," she said. "I wonder what there'll be for tea? Hot scones, perhaps, or those buns with sugar on them."

She never knew how much he understood of what was said to him. But he went with her without protest this time; and seemed, as she pointed out the dogs, the rabbits, and the birds, the different trees and flowers, to have forgotten his earlier intentions.

Then suddenly, as they walked along with her hand on his elbow, she felt his fingers in her blazer pocket.

She thought of all the stories she had heard of the cunning of people who were not quite sane; imagined him seizing the matches in one hand and knocking her out with a biff from the other, and rushing back to make his haystack bonfire. Then she remembered that the matches were not in that pocket at all, but on the other side.

She said sharply, "Come along, Kenneth! Don't scrabble in my pockets!" The tone had its effect, whether he understood the words or not, for he looked at her out of the corners of his eyes, smiled his infantile, disarming smile, which was so like Kitty's and yet so different in its unintelligence, and came.

Annis talked to him all the way, and there was no more difficulty. She guided him at last into his garden, walked round a little way with him, and left him engrossed in a plant which needed tying up. She wedged the trap-door securely, locked the green gate, and drew a breath of relief. She seemed to have escaped from a terrible danger. Nonsense, of course! There hadn't really been danger at all; just Kenneth, who was as gentle as a lamb, and a box of matches the use of which he did not understand.

She dashed back to make quite sure the stacks really were not on fire, then returned at once to the farm. There must not be any forgetting this time. It was so clear now, looking back—the gardener's bonfires and Kenneth's pleasure in them; so often they were made of drying grass, which was uprooted when it grew long round the trees, looking and smelling just like hay; a box of matches left, perhaps, by the gardener in the shed or dropped by him, and Kenneth's discovery how to use them; the other bonfires in the garden, queer ones, some of them, she remembered, with seed-boxes on them and other things which were not generally burnt; Kenneth had made those himself, she had no doubt; then, his discovery that he could get in and out through the cats' trap-door; the sight of the stacks, enormous hillocks of dried grass, all ready, as his muddled mind would see it, for the lighting—and the haystack fires were explained. The stacks had been wet, so they had not flared till long after they were lit—so far, Kitty's theory was correct. Whether Kenneth had seen the glare at night and connected it, or just been satisfied with the little flame and

smoke he could have seen at the time; and how he had known the position of the third group of stacks, they would probably never know.

She sought out Mrs. Forester rather than her husband, believing that she would understand better than he. It was, she felt, so important that Kenneth should not be blamed. He had meant no harm; he simply had not realised what he was doing.

Mrs. Forester understood perfectly. She listened to Annis's story and then to Annis's theory, and agreed that, the one being true, the other probably was. Then sighed, and said, "We'll have to keep a sharper eye on him. It's impossible to foretell what a mind like his will think out; it's such a curious mixture of infant and growing boy."

"You won't have to shut him up somewhere?" Annis queried, and Mrs. Forester smiled.

"No, we won't do that. Only have someone specially, perhaps, to keep an eye on him instead of leaving him alone so much. I'm so glad it was you who discovered it, my dear. Many people would have been clamouring for him to be put in a home or some such place."

"He'd hate it!" Annis said. "To be with other people all the time and not to have his garden!"

"We'll see," Kenneth's mother promised, "that it's all put right. Thank you, my dear, for coming straight to me."

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

FROM THE PERCH

It was soon after this that the village was visited by a small epidemic of typhoid. The Farm School people were not alarmed—the high level of health among the children, and the great care which was taken about cleanliness in the dairy and farmyard, must surely keep them immune. But several of the farm men, who lived away from the farm itself, went down with it, and Hugh and Mr. Forester and the elder boys were kept very busy. The gardener who looked after Kenneth's garden was among the victims, and a few days later Kenneth sickened. He was never as strong as the rest of the family.

It was not difficult for him to be nursed at home, for the wing which had been the nurseries was shut off from the rest of the building and was now given over to him. Mrs. Forester gave up her school duties for the time being, and she and Nanny nursed him, and Margaret took over the management of the house.

Apart from that, the school went on as usual. There was no point in closing it, for scattered cases of the infection cropped up in many different parts. It made no special difference to Annis, except that she was sorry that Kenneth was ill, until one morning when Susan came into her room, and said, "Mother's not well. We're rather afraid it may be this beastly germ."

"Can it be?" Annis asked. "You've been so awfully careful."

"I know. But Father's been visiting cases of it, of course . . . what I'm wondering is, what to do with you?"

"I shan't get it. I'm as strong as anything since I've been here. I can help you nurse her," Annis said.

But Susan was worried. "No, I can't have that. After all, we had you here to make you strong. You'll have to go home, I think."

"I can't do that," Annis said with some pleasure—she did not want to go, a bit—"because the flat's shut up. Father and Mother are in Scotland. Don't you remember, we specially found out about it because we thought Kitty might stay there for her exam?"

They stared at each other and both exclaimed together, "Kitty's exam! Heavens, I'd forgotten about that!"

"She's got to go to-morrow," Annis said. "Who on earth will take her?"

"I don't see how I can, now, with Mother like this," Susan said. "I was going to, of course. And Mrs. Forester certainly can't, or Mr. Forester either. What a frightful nuisance it all is."

The day seemed pandemonium after that. Annis was banished to the home of Valerie and her brothers several miles away. Nurses came and occupied her room at the doctor's house. Efforts were made to get in touch with her people, which failed because they were touring. There were attempts to arrange for Kitty to go to London with one or other of the visiting staff, which came to nothing because the

only ones who came on that day did not live in London. It seemed as if she would have to give up the exam all together, which meant no scholarship till next year, if at all, and all her arduous practising of no account.

"And I don't believe they can afford to send me, unless I get a schol," Kitty told Annis gloomily. "So it looks as if I shall have to be a housemaid or a gardener after all!"

It really looked rather grim for her—until that evening, when she came rushing to Annis all smiles. "Miss de V.'s going to take me!" she announced.

"Miss de V.! But she hates London as much as you do!"

"I know! That makes it all the more decent of her."

Annis was startled. She had thought Miss de Vipon was receding into the background, and here she was bobbing up to be with Kitty at the very time of all others when Kitty would need support. She'd slide away, if one wanted help, Kitty had said, and Annis had been glad to hear it. And she didn't at all, she came forward at the very minute she was wanted, and she and Kitty would come back firmer friends than ever.

She said sourly, "I expect you'll both oversleep and never get to the exam place at all!"

Kitty opened wide eyes; then flung an arm round Annis, a demonstration she had never attempted before.

"Old donkey! If *only* your family had been at home there wouldn't have been any question of her coming; I should have gone there, and you'd have come too, I expect! But they aren't. And they

wouldn't let *you* come and nursemaid me—it *must* be a grown-up—and she seems to be the only grown-up to be had! You ought to be glad *someone's* come forward to save the situation!"

Annis was, incredibly to both of them, almost in tears. "I know I ought! I am, really! Only why must it always be *her* that does things with you, when I hate it so? I know it's just that I'm jealous! I'm honest enough to see that now, anyway! But there really *is* something to be jealous of, isn't there, when things like this happen?"

They were strolling along now, arm in arm.

Kitty was saying eagerly, "But you needn't be jealous! You really needn't be! I do like Miss de V., awfully, but that doesn't prevent my liking you! You were the first friend I ever had, and nothing can alter that, don't you see? Only I *must* have other friends as well, and you *must* let me without being hurt about it! I don't *belong* to you or to anyone! I'm like that. It's as if there were lots of different me's all looking out in different directions. Do you remember how one of those books about Shakespeare said he was like that—had facets to him like a diamond, and that was why he could reflect so many different kinds of people? I don't mean I'm like Shakespeare—really—but I *am* that kind of person!"

Annis was half-laughing now. The idea of Kitty as a little Shakespeare was amusing. But there was sense in it. She was that kind of person. She did not belong to anyone. But perhaps—one day—she might—if someone grabbed tight enough—and then she would be unhappy.

She managed a smile. "Well, don't let her grab

you!" she said, and Kitty, not knowing really what she meant, realised that she was appeased and boasted, "No one shall grab me! Don't you be afraid!"

While Kitty was actually away, Annis saw from the cherry tree the end of one of the comedies which was being played among the frequenters of the farm.

First Margaret came along, hurrying towards the village. She had not much spare time lately for getting out, and Annis was surprised to see her.

She had not long been out of sight when young Dr. Davidson appeared, and someone with him—so that was where Margaret had been off to, as usual, to meet him. How very far apart they were walking, one on one side of the path and one on the other—why, it wasn't Margaret at all, it was Susan, swinging a long-handled bag so vigorously that it almost turned upside down. Dr. Davidson had his hands in his pockets, and they were both walking with heads bent, neither saying a word.

"They do look worried!" Annis said to herself. "I hope Mrs. Cousens isn't really bad!" Then Susan gave her bag a tremendous jerk and Dr. Davidson kicked a stone irritably along the path, and she nearly laughed. "Why, I do believe they're quarrelling!"

They stopped a little distance from the tree and faced each other, Susan standing bolt upright, the doctor hunched a little. He was talking—spreading out his hands as though in explanation. He had no sooner stopped than Susan began, spitting out her words, eyes flashing, cheeks flaming. Annis had

never dreamed that the doctor's daughter, Kitty's competent music mistress, always so steady, if sometimes rather grim, could fly into such a tantrum. She wished she could hear what they were saying, but they were just too far away.

The doctor had joined in now. They looked like a couple of angry puppets, as though they might start a Punch-and-Judy battle at any minute.

The doctor straightened himself suddenly; gave a ridiculous little formal bow, and strode away, back by the way they had come.

Susan stopped speaking as though by magic. Her hands dropped to her sides as she stared after him. She seemed about to call, but gulped and did not, then stumbled towards a tree as though she were blind, groping, and leaned her head on her hands against its trunk.

"Gosh, she's crying!" Annis pondered whether to go down and offer comfort, or to stay hidden where she was.

She did not dare go down, so miserably were Susan's shoulders shaking. Under her breath, she addressed herself fiercely to the doctor: "Come back, you blithering ass! Haven't you ever seen anyone in a rage before? She's sorry, now! Only I don't believe she'll ever say so, unless you do first!"

But the young man was out of sight and sound, and there was Susan, calm, rock-like Susan, sobbing into the gnarled bark of a cherry tree.

There were footsteps in the lane, and voices. Susan, deafened by her own crying, had not heard them. Annis craned her neck to see. It was the doctor, come back to make amends, and—just catching him up—Margaret.

"Golly!" Annis said to herself. "I must do something! Whatever can I do?" She was staging in her mind a sensational faint from the tree, so that they would all forget their own concerns in looking after her, and make it up, perhaps, later on—when Susan and the doctor saw each other.

Susan caught up her fallen bag, preparatory to flight. But she was not quick enough. The doctor was over the stile and up to her in two strides, his arms round her. For an instant she pommelled his chest like an angry child, then her rage was gone and she was burrowing her face into his shoulder, and letting him take hold of it by the chin and kiss her.

"Well!" Annis thought to herself. "Fancy two quite *elderly* people behaving like that! I suppose they *have* still got feelings after all, though they must be getting on for thirty! Fancy Susan——!"

She looked round for Margaret, who was, she well knew, still of an age to feel. But Margaret, though she must have seen, had vanished.

The doctor had pulled out an immense handkerchief and was tenderly mopping Susan's eyes, and Susan was smiling. They were talking, very quietly now—shyly, almost.

Silly, they did look! How furious they would be if they found out they'd been watched. A jolly good thing she hadn't gone down to Susan, or this would not have happened. She smiled on them benignly.

Susan made a remark, pointing it with an index finger on one of the doctor's waistcoat buttons, glancing up, and down again. It was followed by silence. The doctor, looking out over Susan's head,

had set his lips into a grim line. Susan wriggled out of his grasp and dodged as he tried to grab her hands.

Annis leaned forward fearfully. They couldn't be going to spoil it now. "Oh, *don't* start quarrelling again!" she adjured them. "It's not worth it, whatever it's about, when you know you get on so frightfully well together really!"

Susan's mouth dropped open. The doctor's obstinate lips curled into a grin. Slowly the two faces turned in Annis's direction, and she realised horror-struck, that she must have spoken aloud.

She tried to efface herself among the branches, but the two had joined hands and were standing close beneath her, laughing. Her face was like a beetroot. She said, "I'm frightfully sorry! I just happened to be here! I didn't know whether to stay or to come down! But I didn't mean to say that out loud! I didn't mean you ever to know I'd been here!"

The doctor threw back his head and hooted. His arm was round Susan's shoulders, and Susan did not seem to mind.

"It was jolly good advice, straight from the gods!" he called. "And it probably saved a very serious situation! Did you hear what we were arguing about?"

Annis shook her head. "I didn't hear a thing!"

He looked down at Susan, and Susan nodded.

"Whether we could manage to get married this year or not. Susan said not. I said now or never."

In a little voice, Susan put in, "I will if you like, John!" And at the same minute the doctor added: "Maybe you were wise after all. I'll get that exam

off my chest, and we'll do it at Christmas. But not a week later!"

They looked up again, and laughed in a funny, sheepish way like small boys caught playing jokes. "Thank you, voice from the gods!" they called, and walked away, their arms blatantly now round each other's waists.

The next day, Kitty was back; just the same Kitty, loving the country and hating London, even though Miss de Vipon had insisted on their staying an extra night and going to see *A Midsummer Night's Dream* in Regent's Park. Kitty had enjoyed that, yes, and Miss de Vipon had been terribly nice and shown her all sorts of interesting things.

"But she is the maddest person!" Kitty went on. "She lost our tickets once and had to pay the fare all over again. And we got into the tube the wrong way round and had to go through about twenty stations instead of three—that was going to the exam, and we only *just* got there in time—I thought of what you'd said about oversleeping! It was fun, though!"

"And did you get on all right in the exam?" Annis asked, and Kitty shrugged.

"I played quite well, and I said all I knew in the fewest possible words in the paper. Father says that's the way to do well in exams. Now I'm going to forget all about it till next week, when the results come out. Is there anything you've absolutely *got* to do? Well, let's go on the river; it's the peace-fulest thing I can think of after all those noises, and smells, and grits."

So they took a canoe—a proper one, not the *Anderida*, because their legs were too long, now, to

fit into her comfortably—and Kitty perched up on one end to paddle off the stiffness of sitting in a train, and Annis lolled in the other and watched her and the river.

It was peaceful. The air was still; there was no sound but the plop of fish or little animals in the water, and the tinkle of drops from Kitty's paddle. The sun made pools of fragile golden light and flecked the deep-blue shadows under the willow-trees, picking out their roots here and there through the water in clumps of ruby red.

They passed a bed of reeds, some standing up like spears, some angled so that they touched the water with their tips—water so quiet that their reflections were as clear as they, and made with them queer geometrical figures. "There's a diamond—a hexagon—and look, there's one with three bends on it—eight sides—octagon—aren't they funny?"

"Nice!" Kitty agreed. "I wish someone would paint a picture of them. They couldn't be like that if it wasn't still and bright and—summer. I should like to have it, to look at whenever I felt let up."

Annis knew that she was accepting the fact that one day she would have to spend much of her time in a town, away from it all. "Shall I ask Adrian to?" she said, and Kitty nodded.

"I wish you would!"

Presently Kitty said, "There's a kingfisher. I saw him flash out—and in again. He's gone in by that big willow."

Annis turned carefully over on her front to watch for him, and in a minute out he came, fleeing before the canoe like a frightened spirit, dipping, skimming

and vanishing again, his blue back glinting metallic in the sun.

"There's another bird," Annis said later. "Hovering. Do you see? Catching flies?"

Kitty took out her paddle, to be quite quiet. The little bird was poised in the air, upright, with beating wings and long beak outstretched. In a second, it had dived, and was up again, and away—only a foot or two, then hovering once more.

"It *is* the kingfisher!" they whispered both together. "See his blue wings and his chestnut breast!"

He dropped towards the water again, and this time fled downstream with something in his beak.

"Fishing!" they breathed. "I didn't know he did it like that!"

"Wasn't it darling of him, to give a demonstration specially for us?"

They laughed with sheer happiness from the magic of it all: Kitty's exam and Annis's jealousy behind them, the lovely afternoon which neither could have enjoyed one-half so much without the other.

At the bank, Kitty said, "I ought to go into the cottage, if you don't mind. There's some music of mine in Miss de V.'s suitcase, and I don't want to leave it there."

Annis did not mind. Really did not mind. She felt able to face a dozen Miss de V.s. Kitty, with a little questioning glance, linked arms and together they strolled up the overgrown gravel path.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

GRAND FINALE

THE following week was full of excitements.

It began with two announcements from the doctor's house—that Mrs. Cousens had not, in spite of their fears, got typhoid, so that anxiety was removed and Annis was able to come back to her own room; and that Susan and Dr. Davidson were engaged.

Margaret had been so quiet for several days that Mrs. Forester, knowing nothing of the cause, had administered a dose of Gregory's powder; and either the powder, or more likely Margaret's natural good sense, aided by the passing of time, brought her spirits back so that her congratulations to the couple were as hearty as everyone else's.

Then there was the visit of the Government Inspectors to the farm—their high praise of Hugh's model dairy arrangements, their shocked amazement when they found Miss de Vipon's filthy shed so short a distance away. They told her that milk from such a place must never be sold for drinking. They could not prevent her using it herself, they said, if she wished, or feeding animals on it. But they showed such evident disapproval of her amateur farming that the very next day she sent the cows and the calf to market, and gave Mr. Forester a month's notice that she would be leaving the cottage, for some other place, she said, where her personal liberty would not be interfered with.

Annis wondered whether Kitty would mind, but she did not seem to be heartbroken.

"She'll write to me, I expect, and p'r'aps she'll come and stay here sometimes. I hope she will—she's fun. But I think she got a bit tired of having me always round even on those few days we were in London. She seems to hate any sort of tie," Kitty said. "And she's too much older than me for us to be really great friends, I suppose. Anyway, I'm glad to have known her, and I hope I shall go on knowing her—in spots. She's rather—disturbing—to have about all the time. Hugh'll be glad: he's been saying for weeks that he wants to put a farm-hand in that cottage."

Annis wondered if she had hit on another rule of life—that Providence did not remove a thing—or a person—whom you resented, until you had stopped resenting it.

Then came the news that Adrian's pony had been accepted by the Exhibition, not only accepted but given a good place. Several people had wanted to buy it, but Adrian said he had done it for Annis and would not let them have it.

And at last, at the end of the week—Kitty's scholarship, which she had won far ahead of other candidates. Both she and Susan went about in a glow of modest pride, and Susan insisted on celebrating with four tickets—for Kitty, Annis, Dr. Davidson, and herself—to go to *Figaro* at the Glyndebourne Opera House.

All four were sure that they would never forget that evening.

They dressed and had an early tea, laughing because it seemed so odd to have tea in evening-dress,

and started off in Dr. Davidson's car. An ordinary pretty country drive through lanes at first, they came presently to the stretch of downland above Lewes, and stopped for a minute to look out over the valley there. Then down through the queer, winding old town and out the other side, joined now by many other cars, and on through lanes again until they turned in at the gates of the big country house and parked in a field.

They were early, so they wandered round.

The house was of warm red brick, beautifully placed on a terrace, with new wings built on so skilfully that it was difficult to tell them from the old.

From one part came sounds of singing—phrases being repeated over and over. Kitty crowed with pleasure. "Fancy great people like these practising just beforehand! I should have thought they'd have known it standing on their heads!"

People—men and women—some of them looking very un-English—came in and out of that part of the building. "Why, these must be some of them! How frightfully exciting!" They fell to guessing who of the artists was who.

There was a resemblance, Annis thought, hearing about them, between this place and the Farm School. Both had the same insistence on the best, both were removed from the bustle of town and set in beauty in the country. She was thrilled by the thought of people coming from all over the world to sing here, each singer the best who could be found for the part he was to take.

They went to their seats, presently, in the great hall specially built to carry sound; read the story of the opera on the programmes, eagerly, for it

would be in Italian; and, in a few minutes, were lost in a magic of music, colour, and laughter.

Figaro has none of the tragedy of many operas; it plays and laughs from beginning to end. Here, in this lovely setting, there was nothing to ridicule, no portly matron, chosen purely for her voice, with no thought of her appearance or her acting, shrieking love or revenge. Here, the countess was slim and stately, and her lord handsome, for all his bad temper; the serving wench was pretty and pert, the page a boyish rogue. They romped through their ridiculous situations with evident enjoyment, with Mozart's delicious music flowing round and from them.

In the interval, the party from the Farm School took sandwiches and fruit into the grounds and sat among the trees to eat them in the summer dusk. They spoke little, they were living in the music, humming snatches of it under the breath, tapping out its melodies unconsciously with restless toe. When they had finished supper, they explored the gardens, two couples of them, each arm in arm, brushing silently among other couples equally bewitched. Part of the gardens were divided into enclosures by high yew hedges. In one such square, tall white lilies nodded fragrant heads against the darkness. In another, pale-yellow violas fluttered like flocks of fragile moths. Farther out, there were scattered trees, a lake, moonlight.

Near the building, in little terraced spaces with fountains in them and sentinel irises, in purple, shaking off the tumbling drops, the audience began to gather, ready to go in again—men and women in modern evening-dress, all magicked by the music

and the place into gentleness, many into silence. Annis and Kitty, hand in hand, squeezed with them into the darkened hall.

The countess sang sadly, lamenting that she had lost her husband's love. The ridiculous elderly couple discovered that they were husband and wife and the hero their son. The lady and her maid played a joke on their two husbands, impersonating each other in the starlit garden; and the opera ended in general rejoicing.

The party staggered out, sleepy, drunk with music, to find their car. Annis and Kitty packed into the back; talked for a little, watching the flying tree-trunks lit with headlights against the dark; and very soon dropped to sleep.

They woke when the car slowed up for the winding lanes of the village.

Kitty yawned. "It's fun—growing up!" she announced.

Annis blinked and nodded. "'M! Painful, sometimes, and rather frightening. But definitely—fun."

THE END

